



LAURA BUSH 21st CENTURY LIBRARIAN PROGRAM

Sample Application RE-260525-OLS-26
Project Category: Forum

University of Illinois, University Library

Amount awarded by IMLS: \$187,554
Amount of cost share: \$0

The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the University of Illinois Chicago will examine the systemic challenges facing mid-career academic librarians and convene a forum to help disrupt them. In mid-career, questions arise about career trajectory, barriers limiting transition between institutions become salient, and problems of work-life balance expand. Additionally, these librarians have advanced beyond most available mentoring and support. Previous work by the project team exposed the current reliance on individual action and goal-setting and revealed a significant interest in systemic or organizational culture. This project will respond by conducting a scoping review, leading focus groups, and convening an interdisciplinary forum to identify recommendations and next steps for academic libraries and professional organizations to better support mid-career librarians.

Attached are the following components excerpted from the original application.

- Narrative
- Schedule of Completion

When preparing an application for the next deadline, be sure to follow the instructions in the most recent Notice of Funding Opportunity for the grant program to which you are applying.

Title: Missing the Middle: Identifying Structural Issues Facing Mid-Career Academic Librarians

Introduction: The University of Illinois Urbana - Champaign and the University of Illinois Chicago request a Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program - Forum Project for \$188,815, which will be expended over 2 years. Specifically, we will 1) conduct a scoping review regarding issues that cause systemic challenges, career dissatisfaction, and employment attrition among experienced librarians; 2) convene a series of focus groups to capture qualitative data regarding structural and cultural barriers in academic libraries that inhibit mid-career professional growth; 3) convene a forum to draw upon interdisciplinary expertise in identifying mechanisms to disrupt and eliminate challenges and barriers; and 4) develop preliminary recommendations for academic libraries and professional organizations to better support mid-career librarians, promoting future library experts, leaders, and managers. The results of this project will include publications and supporting materials documenting the current state of the mid-career academic literature, documentation of systemic issues and challenges, and suggestions from the community and related disciplines to identify mechanisms for addressing these issues. The approach taken in this project aims to elevate and enhance access to professional development support for individuals in a wide range of institution types, communities, sub-disciplines and geographic locations.

Project Justification:

Academic librarians face challenges in professional development and support, career advancement, limited recognition for advanced subject expertise, and personal stressors and changes as they navigate the middle of their careers. They have gained practical experience and moved beyond learning the fundamental skills of the profession or integrating into a workspace. In mid-career, questions arise about career trajectory (including or beyond management), professional and personal barriers limiting transition between institutions become salient, and problems of work-life balance emerge and expand. Additionally, these librarians have advanced beyond most available early-career focused mentoring and support and are often tasked with mentoring new colleagues. Current mechanisms such as peer mentoring groups are individual focused solutions that rely on the labor of individuals and that are not sustainable in the long term, particularly without dedicated funding. Finally, while there may be willingness from individual leaders or groups, institutions and professional organizations often have inverse incentives to provide systemic support, as there may be perceptions that librarians will become too expensive after promotion or will leave the institution after investment in skills development.

This proposal builds upon previous work by the Project Team including a sold out mid-career workshop held at the [Research Data Access and Preservation Summit 2024](#), a career development workshop held at [Midwest Data Librarians Symposium 2024](#), and a presentation held at the [STEM Librarians Collaborative 2024](#). These previous events exposed the current trends of mid-career academic support that are reliant on individual action and goal-setting. They also revealed a significant interest in the professional community for a more structured and expanded investigation of this topic. While our preliminary work has prompted additional continuing educational activities from some data and science library-focused professional organizations, this topic is relevant across all areas of academic libraries. However, our project differs most specifically from current mid-career support initiatives in that it is not intended to provide a new goal-setting to do list, create a community of practice or call for deeper recommitment from individuals. Instead, this project will examine structural supports that can be

implemented within academic libraries to clarify career trajectory, enhance career satisfaction, and increase academic librarian retention. As this project is time limited, we are committed to avoiding replication of demands for individual labor from already over-service-burdened colleagues. This project will support LB21 Objective 2.1 addressing workplace culture, knowledge and structures that hinder the long-term retention and success of mid-career academic librarians.

A review of existing literature and thinking about mid-career academics and mid-career librarianship indicates many open questions needing investigation, including around systemic support needs. The period of mid-career is defined in many ways, including via relationship to educational phase (i.e. Post-Terminal Degree), promotion status, post-tenure, a certain number of years within the field, or specific age ranges (Somo, Sandy 2015; Baker and Manning 2021b; Treebak and Thomsen 2022). This lack of a common definition means that the literature on mid-career academics, including librarians, are often addressing differing groups while clustering them under the same title. Those who fall under the descriptor of mid-career can vary from beginning a tenure track role (defined as Post-Terminal Degree), associate professor status, number of years since promotion (0-7 years from promotion vs. 7 years plus from promotion), or individuals in the age groups of 30-45 or 40-50 (Baker and Manning 2021b). These groups are recognized as having substantively different needs but are collectively clustered under the umbrella heading of mid-career (Baker and Manning 2021a, 424). While these may not be mutually exclusive for all individuals, generally these characteristics identify groups of people with differing life stages and circumstances (Baker and Manning 2021a; Somo, Sandy 2015). West and Gazoolis note that academic librarians may be considered mid-career after a certain number of years within their roles, or when they reach the level of administration where they wish to remain for the rest of their career (2023). These definitions do not account for those who switch roles, whose age and career in libraries generally indicate that they are mid-career, but who are taking on the tenure track from the rank of assistant professor; these individuals have the challenges of both early and mid-career simultaneously.

The literature around supports for mid-career professionals in academia primarily focus on solutions at the individual level (Baker and Manning 2021a; Boyd and Chick 2024; Covarrubias 2024; Ejebu et al. 2024; Harrison and Strevens 2023; Kelling et al. 2024; Kim et al. 2024; Faulkner and Reiter 2025a; Maddox-Daines 2016; Marshall and Jackman 2024; Millard 2003; Schnackenberg 2022; West and Galoozis 2023). In an indication of the frequency of the concept of mid-career as an individual problem to be solved, at least five books have been written since 2021 (and the societal trauma of the COVID stay at home orders) that focus on helping mid-career professionals to identify solutions to their personal mid-career malaise (Baker 2022; Baker et al. 2023; Boyd and Chick 2024; Schnackenberg 2022; West and Galoozis 2023).

Literature examining structural supports for mid-career faculty is far less common. Baker and Manning note that the concept of institutional approaches date back to the 1970s. They observe that the literature of mid-career faculty in the 1970s and 1980s resulted in a focus on “who has responsibility for faculty development and how faculty programming should be conceived to foster continued learning needed in the academic profession and desired by mid-career faculty” (Baker and Manning 2021b). The 1990s transitioned to a focus on the individual faculty member, the 2000s focused on the impacts of changes in higher education on the individual, and the 2010s focused on the impacts of the environment of higher education on minoritized individuals (Baker and Manning 2021b). The literature of the past five years has completed the pendulum swing to focus on individual needs, with a particular focus on work-life balance and the impact of mid-career on women in the academy (Allgood et al. 2024; Kelling et al. 2024;

Laursen and Austin 2020; Manzi et al. 2024; Sterling et al. 2025; West and Galoozis 2023; Faulkner and Reiter 2025a; Rempel and Nichols 2026).

Structural interventions have changed as the focus of the literature has changed, documenting how organizational culture has morphed from structurally focused to individually focused. As noted in *College and Research Library News* issues of the period, throughout the 1970s, the Council on Library Resources (CLR) distributed annual fellowships to encourage mid-career librarians to pursue “self-developed study” (“17 Midcareer Librarians Get CLR Fellowships.” 1977). In the 1970s and 1980s, Lilly Endowment and Mellon Foundation supported the Program for Faculty Renewal, including funding, two week residences at Stanford University, and network-building activities. By the 1990s, interventions began to take the form of mentoring and workshops, whether led by departmental leaders, or through professional organizations. In the 2000s, mentoring and post-tenure review emerged as important sources of institutional support for mid-career faculty. In the 2010s, institutions widely implemented mentoring and/or coaching programs, with specific focus on individual goal setting and retention of minoritized individuals and women (Baker and Manning 2021b).

In the past two years, the Conference on Academic Library Managers published a white paper discussing the results of a study that specifically investigated the role of professional organizations in providing structural supports for mid-career library managers (Cook et al. 2025). Faulkner and Reiter did an extensive review of the literature in order to identify the characteristics of those who choose library leadership in mid-career, and to describe professional development supports that may be effective for developing future library leaders at the local library level (2025b). Sapp-Nelson and Goben identified a number of structural constraints and cultural features of libraries that lead mid-career data librarians to move from their area of subject expertise into library administration (2026). Rempel and Nichols conducted a survey and focus group of 15 mid-career librarians to determine what structural supports and professional development to which the subjects are likely to respond positively (2026).

The literature from library and information science has distinct themes. Characteristics of the mid-career experience are frequently assumed to be parallel with impacts of childbirth, childcare, parenthood and caregiving, reflecting the majority female population in libraries (Couture et al. 2020; Rempel and Nichols 2026; McGeeney 2025). Individual characteristics such as burnout; caregiving responsibilities; workload; and dealing with workplace abuse or neglect are identified as common sources of mid-career tensions, as reflected by the low morale research agenda led by Kaetrena Kendrick (2017). What little guidance is published focuses on repairing these issues through personal advocacy or change in position rather than efforts at the institutional or professional organization level. The recommended activities, therefore, do not seek to change the culture which is leading to or enhancing the challenges individuals encounter, but instead further promote organizational commitment and vocational awe compounded with the added pressure of academic capitalism (Ettarh 2018).

Despite the recent plethora of academically-focused books and literature attempting to address the individual ways to solve mid-career issues, these materials often fail to address the unique setting of academic libraries. Within these organizations, librarians may hold varying designations including student affairs staff, academic staff, faculty rank without tenure, faculty rank with tenure, or other designations. The tools and resources available to them and the expectations of them therefore vary even more widely than what may be available to disciplinary faculty peers at their same institutions. Further, librarians have a practitioner requirement that is not generally reflected in the academic-focused literature, which divides the traditional faculty

tasks into teaching, service, and scholarship. By not acknowledging this fourth area of responsibility, praxis, the guidance can at best be limited.

This project is needed, therefore, to counter the current individual-focused narratives addressed at mid-career academic librarians and recommend specific interventions that foster better pathways toward career satisfaction and growth. Our goals for this project are to:

- Document the systemic and structural barriers which could be changed in order to improve mid-career supports and academic librarian retention.
- Draw from interdisciplinary peers to adopt/adapt best practices
- Identify topics, interventions, and programs to present to professional organizations and library administrators as recommendations for implementation.

The **target audiences** of this project are academic library leaders who are interested in disrupting systemic issues and improving library culture in support of mid-career librarians and for professional organizations that support academic librarians. For the purposes of this grant, we welcome those who self-identify as mid-career to participate. While the **primary beneficiaries** are mid-career librarians themselves, addressing these issues may have broader benefits for librarians across all points of their career. The American Library Association reports that there are over 3,500 academic libraries throughout the United States and there are well over 100 national, regional, state and local professional organizations and sub-discipline groups.

Project Work Plan:

The Missing in the Middle project is comprised of three overlapping phases during which we will (Phase 1) conduct background research leading to a foundational scoping review, (Phase 2) use themes derived from the scoping review to develop and conduct 10-15 focus groups with mid-career librarians and (Phase 3) create and host a virtual forum to bring together multi-disciplinary experts to name and document systemic issues and discuss and develop ideas for disruption and change. The Project Team: Megan Sapp-Nelson (UIUC) and Abigail Goben (UIC) will co-lead the project and develop and manage the deliverables with the support of a part-time graduate research assistant. Sapp-Nelson and Goben will collaborate with a consultant team of Jamene Brooks-Kieffer (KU), Lindsay Cronk (Tulane), Brittani Sterling (UNLV) and Camille Thomas (FSU) (hereafter Consultant Team) who will provide advisory support.

Phase 1: Scoping Review of the Literature

The challenges of mid-career librarians have been sporadically addressed through the literature over the past quarter century, with books and articles which document and outline frustrations and make recommendations on how individuals should direct themselves to pursue career development or find career satisfaction, primarily through additional labor and service. Much of this is mirrored in the mid-career faculty literature. However, there has not been a systematic investigation of the content of this literature nor an evaluation of the gaps both in research and practical guidance. Without this, further investigation into mid-career academic librarianship is likely to repeat topics already expansively addressed. A structured literature review is needed to ground this project and identify the specific needs of academic librarians. Using the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) framework for conducting scoping reviews, we will:

- Locate and collect the research, praxis, and popular non-fiction related to mid-career academic librarians
- Use inductive thematic analysis to capture the themes related in the literature, with a specific lens of documenting systemic issues and solutions.
- Extract topics to inform the focus groups and as preliminary ideas for the forum.

- Explore multi-disciplinary materials to identify potential systemic barriers as well as transferable solutions
- Create a visual gap analysis of the extant literature

Sapp Nelson and Goben will co-develop and conduct the scoping review with support from the graduate assistant including creating and refining the searches, screening titles and abstracts, conducting theme analysis and creating the paper. The Consultant Team will be asked to review and advise on the search strategy. Outputs: The outputs from Phase One will include documented search strategies and an overarching protocol to enhance reproducibility, a bibliography of included papers, a bibliography of excluded papers, a journal article manuscript prepared for peer review submission, and materials from any accepted conference presentations. We anticipate that the manuscript will answer the following questions:

- What are the systemic drivers of mid-career malaise in academic librarians?
- What systemic solutions have been implemented in other disciplines that can be applied in academic library settings?

A project website will be built that provides information on the project, enrollment in the various activities of the grant, and redirects to the University of Illinois Chicago [INDIGO](#) document repository where the deliverables will be made available. The Consultant Team will also be asked to review the manuscript and supplemental files prior to submission to publication venues.

Phase Two: Focus Groups of Mid-Career Librarians

While we anticipate that the literature review will reflect themes related to concerns of mid-career academic librarians, this will always be delayed by the time required for writing and publishing. Therefore, to best capture the current goals, interests, and concerns of mid-career librarians at present, we will conduct a series of 10-15 virtual focus groups of up to 10 participants each between Spring-Fall 2026, with a total of 100 participants. 2-3 pilot focus groups will be conducted to test the scripts and facilitation manuals. Interested librarians from the researchers' local institutions will be recruited to assist with the pilot groups. Recruitment for the focus groups will draw academic librarians from a variety of institutional types and locations across the United States. We will seek to include librarians who represent many ranks, subject areas, and experience types. The focus groups will be recorded and transcribed to allow for qualitative analysis using Taguette or a similar software. The goals of these focus groups will include:

- Use reflexive thematic analysis to code the trends arising from the data and the alignment or variance from our understandings
- Documenting current and anticipated systemic issues for mid-career librarians
- Providing initial opportunities for ideation related to supports and solutions
- Documenting variance of challenges between library-rank types
- Identifying potential areas for further targeted research investigation

Goben will lead the development of the focus group protocol. She and Sapp-Nelson will jointly conduct the focus groups. The graduate assistant will assist in the focus group logistics, quality control, review and analysis of the focus group transcripts. The Consultant Team will be asked to review and advise on the focus group protocol. The Consultant Team will also be asked to review manuscripts, the codebook, transcript extracts and other materials prior to deposit in INDIGO. A codebook that details the definition and usage of all thematic codes used in the analysis will be made available. Extracts from transcripts that elucidate findings will be shared via a separate

supplemental file that will be archived on INDIGO. No identifiable human subject information will be shared.

Outputs: The outputs from this phase will include a focus group protocol, a sample de-identified transcript, the thematic codebook and reflexive codebook prompts, a collection of transcript extracts, a peer reviewed paper and conference presentations.

Phase 3: A One-Day Virtual Forum

Though the target of our research is mid-career academic librarians and we wish to ground our work and findings in the challenges and opportunities which face them, disciplines beyond library science have investigated these challenges and it will be critical that we do not reinvent the wheel but we draw from those disciplines in addition to librarian expertise to create a forum. This will be an 8-hour online event held in Spring 2027 either in a single day or over 2 half-days. This event, building upon the gap analysis from the scoping review and drawing upon the findings from the focus groups, will aggregate not only these findings but will seek to draw upon a variety of disciplines to propose the systemic steps that current academic library leaders and professional associations can take to address the needs of mid-career librarians and enhance workplace cultures in a systemic fashion. The forum will be structured to meet the following goals:

- Ground attendees in current issues that have coalesced from the previous phases
- Draw from experts in librarianship and other relevant disciplines (such as human resources, organizational leadership, and sociology) to discuss mechanisms for systemic changes to adapt
- Brainstorm mechanisms to develop systemic and institutional responses to issues for mid-career academic librarians
- Brainstorm mechanisms for professional associations to support mid-career academic librarians

The forum will be constructed around presentations from 3-5 experts on mid-career supports from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds. All presenters will bring their specific lens to the systemic structures and failures that compound to create problems for mid-career academic librarians. After each expert has presented, participants will be divided into breakout rooms and asked to complete either a reflection activity designed to further individual engagement with the presentation and elicit systematic support issues that they have experienced, or a synthesis activity that surfaces themes across their collective experiences. The forum will begin with an overview of what the researchers learned in Phase 1 and 2 of the project, and will end with opportunities for participants to provide feedback and further ideation, based on their experience in the forum. Data from the forum will be collected via Zoom recording and transcript.

Sapp-Nelson will lead the design of the initial forum schedule. She and Goben will jointly create the final agenda, invite speakers, and coordinate events during the day with the support of the graduate assistant. They will capture presentations, notes, discussions, and other materials related to the conference. The Consultant Team will assist in forum agenda topic identification and expert recruitment. Where appropriate, the Consultant Team may be asked to present on topics related their research expertise or to assist in facilitating discussions. Forum participants will be provided written pre-readings from phase one and two of the project.

Outputs: The output from this phase will be a white paper authored by Sapp-Nelson and Goben that reports the aggregate findings for the forum with documentation of the current and anticipated systemic barriers facing mid-career academic librarians and multi-disciplinary

suggested practices for organizations to support mid-career librarians. The white paper will include identified quotes from speakers, but will otherwise report findings and cite anonymous quotes from participants. The white paper will be housed on INDIGO, and will be announced via professional list-servs and social media.

Project Team

- Sapp-Nelson and Goben have published and presented widely and have significant expertise in the areas of research data management, professional development program design, assessment, professional belongingness, and faculty development. As described in the Project Justification, they have done preliminary exploration of mid-career challenges in sub-disciplines of academic librarians including data librarianship and STEM librarianship.
- A part-time graduate research assistant will be hired to support the Project Team with conducting the scoping review, focus groups and the thematic analysis of the transcripts, and the forum.
- Based on their practitioner and scholarly expertise, the team will confer with the Consultant Team primarily on an ad hoc basis in relation to their area of expertise. However, the team will strategically consult the Consultant Team to review the scoping review search strategy and the focus group protocol, to discuss data analysis, and when finalizing major outputs (publications and white papers).

Project Results:

Deliverables (*R* - research; *A* - applied):

- Scoping review protocol and search strategies [R]
- Two bibliographies, one of included papers and one of excluded papers [R]
- Focus group protocol [A]
- Sample de-identified transcript [A]
- Thematic codebook [A]
- Reflexive codebook prompts [A]
- Transcript extracts [A]
- 2 peer reviewed papers [R]
- Unknown number of conference proceedings manuscripts and/or presentations [R]
- Forum materials, including presentations and activity prompts [A]
- One white paper [A]

All deliverables will be deposited into the [INDIGO repository](#) at University of Illinois Chicago.

Institutions and professional organizations often recognize that there are issues but are unable to dedicate the time to capture and document the structural issues or support initial identification of solutions. This project addresses that gap and provides a centralized set of documents and findings, providing an evidence-based body of literature from which the target group of academic library leaders can build upon to create both targeted and general solutions. Findings will be disseminated through scholarly journal articles, targeted at journals such as *College & Research Libraries*, portal or the *Journal of Library Administration* or conferences and venues such as the Conference on Academic Library Management which directly appeal to the target audience. The project deliverables which fall under the IMLS Public Access Policy and the University of Illinois system Open Access Policy will be stored in an institutional repository supported by the UIC in easily reusable formats in order to allow broad access and reuse. Where financially feasible following the end of the performance period, the investigators will pursue relevant conference or webinar presentation opportunities to further reach the target audience of academic library leaders and professional organizations. The project team will

conduct outreach to library administrative groups such as CNI, GWLA, BTAA and ARL. Beneficiaries will be able to access the results of this project via the project website and INDIGO repository.

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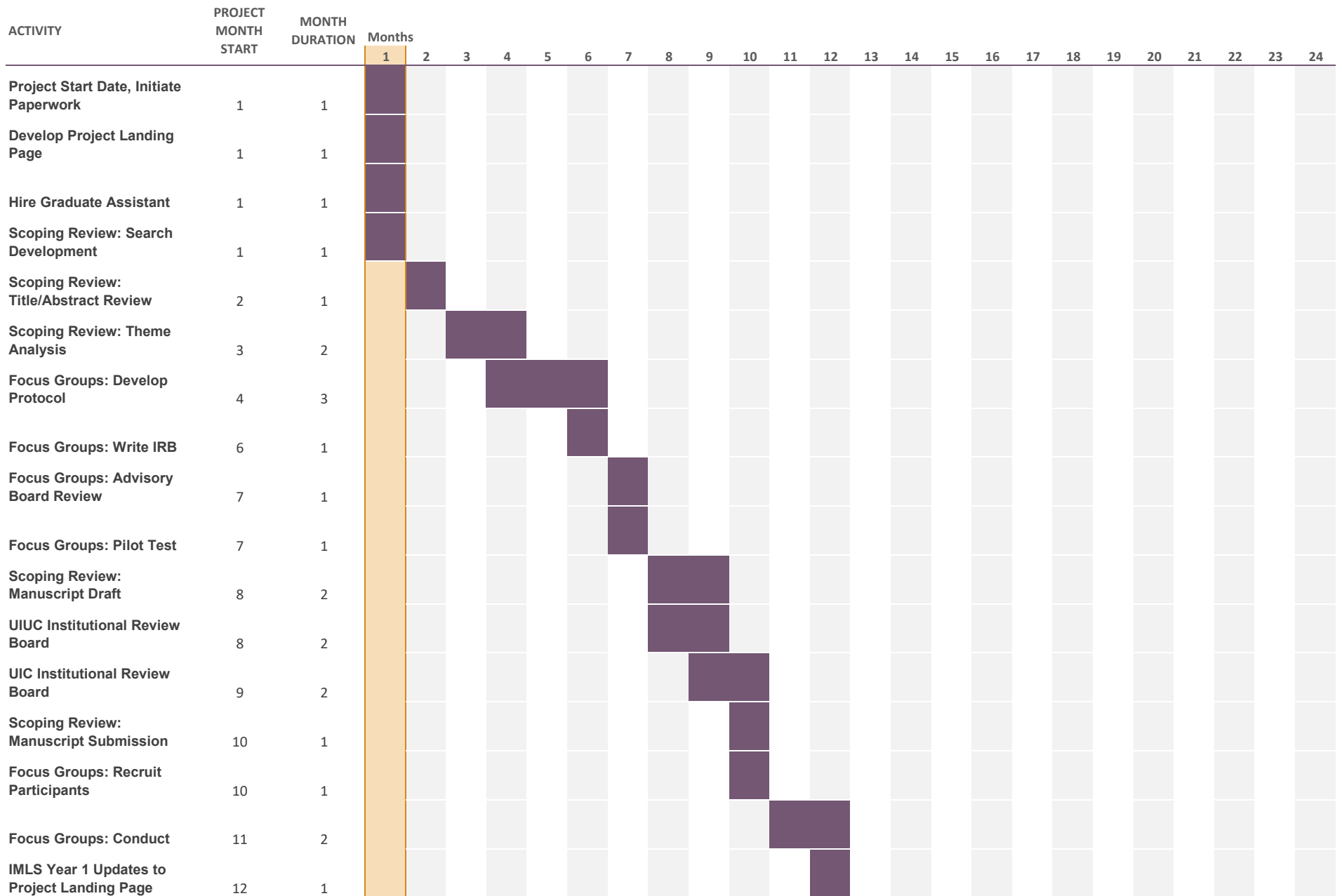
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Missing the Middle Schedule of Completion

Year 1



ACTIVITY	PROJECT MONTH START	MONTH DURATION	Months																							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Submit Public Access Eligible Materials to IMLS and INDIGO	12	1																								
IMLS Year 1 Report	12	1																								
Year 2																										
Focus Groups: Analysis	13	6																								
Forum: Develop Content	15	5																								
Forum: Write IRB	17	1																								
Focus Groups: Draft Manuscript	18	3																								
UIUC Institutional Review Board	18	2																								
UIC Institutional Review Board	19	2																								
Forum: Open Registration	20	2																								
Focus Groups: Submit Manuscript	22	1																								
Forum: Host	22	1																								
Forum: Draft White Paper	22	2																								
IMLS Year 2 Updates to Project Landing Page	24	1																								
Submit Public Access Eligible Materials to IMLS and INDIGO	24	1																								
IMLS Year 2 Report	24	1																								