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HR Practice

Navigating the Academic Library Job Search

By Katherine O'Clair and Emily Rogers

If you ask almost anyone looking for a professional position in an academic library these days, especially those fresh out of school, you will hear that the search isn't easy. You would get a very similar response if you were to ask those who are on search committees looking for the right people to fill positions at their libraries. It all seems very simple and straightforward: job-seeking librarians and LIS students want to know how to successfully manage their job searches and gain employment, while administrators want to know how to attract well-suited candidates to their libraries. Rarely do the two sides come together to share their stories and points of view. However, at this year's Association of College and Research Libraries National Conference in Minneapolis, "seasoned" and next generation academic librarians had the unique opportunity to engage in a very active roundtable discussion. More than a dozen current and future librarians gathered to exchange their points of view about the challenging and seemingly mysterious hiring processes in academic libraries today.

The discussion included leaders in academic library management and current or future job seekers. The roundtable focused on interpreting job advertisements, performing well during the on-campus interview, and navigating the post-interview waters. Those seeking employment in academic libraries had the chance to hear what library administrators wish *they* could say to applicants. The following is what we learned from this roundtable discussion.

How to Read the Job Ad and Apply for the Position

Job ads for positions in academic libraries are often intimidating and overwhelming. According to the "seasoned" librarians at the table, the first thing to do is distinguish between what is required and what is preferred. Libraries seek to hire a candidate who fits the job description. Therefore, a broad job description lets the library justify considering a broad range of candidates, as long as they meet the required qualifications. Affirmative action policies often require employers to comply with the job requirements when hiring. Listing preferred qualifications allows a library to state what they would like a candidate to have, but still allows them to consider someone who meets only the minimum requirements. Even though a job seeker might find it frustrating to be asked for so much expertise in the preferred qualifications, as long as you meet the stated *requirements,* you can be a viable candidate for the position.

Another source of confusion for job seekers occurs when they apply for positions that they feel they are truly qualified for, and they don't even get a nibble. Then, a few months later they see the positions re-advertised or the deadlines extended. Again, the seasoned librarians advise you to look closely at the job requirements—and the start date. Student applicants should keep in mind that most jobs require the MLS or equivalent in hand by the start date (i.e., an applicant who won't complete the degree until mid-August can't be hired for a stated July 15 start date, no matter how well-suited for the job). The same rule applies for years of experience. If the position requires 3 years of professional experience, any applicant with less than that will not be considered for an interview. Once it is clear an applicant does not qualify, the review of the application materials usually stops there. If an ad states "Previous applicants need not reapply," don't waste your time. But, if you now have that degree in hand and otherwise fulfill the requirements, then by all means reapply. This demonstrates the depth of your interest in the position as well.

Many academic libraries have a system of tenure and review in place. This process can be intimidating to qualified candidates who are early in their careers and have not had the opportunity to make professional contributions. The consensus of the administrators was that even without publications, a candidate can show potential by being professionally active and aware of current scholarship. Poster presentations at conferences show a commitment to research, even if you're not yet to the publication stage. An electronic portfolio on the Web is a great way to showcase papers that might lead to further research and future publications. In the application letter, sell yourself as a good investment; libraries want to hire librarians who will be successful in the tenure process. Mention the research you'd like to pursue in the future. Show that you're creative and innovative; you can draw on other experiences besides librarianship to help make your case.

Other tips for the letter of application and résumé include making sure you've tailored your letter to the specific job and

institution, not merely sent in a one-size-fits-all letter. Demonstrate in your letter how *you* fit *that particular job,* rather than just reciting your education and experience, or why you want the job. Additionally, some committees don't want to see your courses listed on your résumé, especially if they've requested transcripts. Most assume you have basic skills such as MS Word and e-mail, so you don't need to repeat them on the résumé either. And remember: there's no excuse for typos. Have a friend or colleague proofread your materials before you send them.

You Got the Interview: Now What?

Now that you've passed the first round, you're headed for the on-campus interview. The seasoned roundtable librarians assert that all libraries want to hire people who'll succeed there. Administrators want to see how you'll fit within the library and the larger academic community, so be sure to do your research and gain familiarity with the school and library. Be prepared to give a sense of your expected career trajectory: how you want to move up; how you want to contribute to the library's (and institution's) mission in the future. Know the library's strengths. Ask for names of the members of the search committee and their positions and specialties ahead of time. It's impressive to be able to say a little about their fields as well as your own specialty. It is also a good idea to practice using the library's website and OPAC ahead of time.

You'll probably meet with different people throughout the day, so think ahead and be consistent in your answers. Your interviewers will notice conflicting answers when they discuss you later, and they *will* compare notes. Be prepared to answer questions about why you want the position and what drew you to librarianship. It is good to be honest, but avoid saying that your love of reading is what inspired you; that's a cliché interviewers don't want to hear again.

Some of the administrators at the roundtable discussion utilize behavioral interviewing techniques. You should expect questions regarding how you have handled certain situations or problems. It is good to try to anticipate the types of questions you might be asked and practice answering them. This will help you to sound natural and confident when answering them during the interview.

If you're expected to give a presentation, you cannot rehearse it too much. Also, try practicing it in different settings. Be prepared for anything, including a computer crash or power outage. Even if you're not applying for a public services position, the committee will still want to see how you present yourself. This is important to them, as you will represent the library at university functions and professional conferences. Although PowerPoint is often the vehicle of choice for giving a presentation, several of the administrators said they had seen some very impressive presentations that did not use PowerPoint.

Above all, *don't beat up on your current institution! Not even if you're encouraged to!* You might contrast your current workplace with the library where you're interviewing in order to show why you expect to be successful in the position, but remember to be positive about your current experience as well.

Interviews can be long and grueling, especially in academic libraries. One director admitted that she liked to schedule her own meeting with a candidate at the end of the visit in order to check the fatigue level. True, interviews are stressful and exhausting, but she still hopes to see some enthusiasm and upright posture by the day's end. Several like to know how the candidate's perceptions of the position or the library have changed by the end of the visit. Be prepared to ask questions as well; it's a way to show that you're curious, interested, and observant. Questions such as “What's a typical day like in this job?” or “What role does this position play in fundraising?” are valid for almost any professional library position.

Above all, view the interview as an opportunity to find out what the institution and your future co-workers are like. The interview allows you to gather information to see if you want to work there. Be honest about yourself and your expectations. The interview is the time to decide if you will be a good fit with the library and vice versa. Just as no applicant wants to go back on the market right away, no library wants to go through more searches than necessary to fill a position. All the seasoned librarians at the roundtable discussion agreed that no one benefits if there is not a good fit, especially if it could have been foreseen had the applicant been straightforward about qualifications and expectations.

Following Through on the Interview

While this discussion focused on applications and interviews, participants offered some advice on the post-interview. Write an email or a letter thanking every member of the search committee. Keep in mind as well that sometimes salary is negotiable, but often not. Funding and leave time for professional development, conference travel funding, and moving expenses are more likely to be negotiable. Be sure to ask when the next pay increase will come, and if you'll be eligible for it (sometimes new employees are not eligible for raises). Ask how the hiring date affects your status, tenure, and performance reviews. If you're hired mid-year, be sure to ask how that will affect your tenure and review.

Finally, what are administrators *really* looking for?

Library administrators stated they were looking for the following characteristics in candidates: creativity, enthusiasm, team skills, adaptability, interpersonal skills, leadership potential, intelligence, and curiosity. Remember that your application letter, résumé, and interview are *your* opportunity to show how much you have to offer.

The authors wish to thank all the participants at the roundtable, who provided valuable insight into the hiring processes at academic libraries.

We would love to hear your feedback on this article!

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