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...
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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