EDITORIAL

Ensuring More Inclusive Hiring Processes

Carmen Cole and Emily Mross

The American Library Association (ALA) considers demonstrating “the principles of effective personnel practices and human resource development” a core competency of librarianship. Yet, few librarians receive specific training to serve on hiring committees as part of their degree studies, though most find themselves asked to participate in searches, sometimes frequently, depending on their institution. As early career librarians, the authors have served on multiple committees in a large academic library, gaining more experience about the process each time. Their work on search committees sparked an interest in implementing best practices to ensure a good experience for job candidates and successful searches that improve services to the university community. Their experience also inspired a research interest. Search committees are gatekeepers. Who is kept out, and why?

Exploring library hiring from an academic perspective brings to light uncomfortable truths. Each person on a search committee has biases that must be confronted to minimize preconceived ideas, and the group must work together so that each candidate receives a fair evaluation based on objective criteria. This decision-making can be complicated and challenging, depending on many factors. A successful search not only means that a good candidate is hired but also requires that the search committee works together, communicates well, develops and uses a fair rubric to assess the applicant pool, gives candidates proper and equal consideration, and chooses a well-qualified finalist who accepts the job offer. It is not impossible, but it is not easy.

What further complicates the hiring task is the lack of diversity in librarianship. Homogenous libraries create homogeneous search committees. Without thoughtful, introspective work, such committee can perpetuate a homogeneous library rather than a diverse, inclusive one.

The authors are not experts in diversity or hiring. They are practitioners who strive to improve the library hiring process for everyone involved, toward the goal of equitable, inclusive libraries for employees and users. Their responsibilities necessitated much questioning, reading, and research. Members of current and future search committees...
at any library should take a similar perspective toward their work. Without a collective understanding of the barriers to equity, diversity, and inclusion in library hiring, nothing will change—and change is far overdue.

“Fit” and Academic Librarianship

The need to diversify librarianship and the lack of progress toward this goal are common topics of conversation in formal and informal spheres of the profession. Similar conversations take place throughout the academy as well. A culprit often examined in the literature and in practice is the nefarious yet ubiquitous concept of “fit” in hiring. Those who serve on search committees have tried to quantify the notion in nonsubjective ways, but the perennial problem is that fit tends to be ineffable. Committee members may declare that a candidate “feels right,” but they often say so because the applicant shares many similarities to them. These resemblances tend to reinforce homogeneity and hegemony because librarianship, much like the academy as a whole, is overwhelmingly White.

The problem does not begin at the hiring stage. The notion of fit tracks back much further and can cause people who do not conform to that image to decide against librarianship as a career long before they would ever apply for a job.

The Librarian Pipeline

Frequently, librarians blame the pipeline of new librarians for lacking diversity. The pipeline myth is the persistent idea that diversity remains a challenge for library hiring because of a shortage of qualified, degree-holding persons from historically minoritized groups to fill vacancies. Most students pursuing a master of library and information science (MLIS) degree and most recent MLIS graduates are White. In 2020, approximately 60 percent of MLIS students were White, even though the number has dropped approximately 15 percentage points since 1990; currently nearly 40 percent of degree candidates come from other racial or ethnic groups. Data from the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) show that in 2020, 62 percent of those receiving a master’s degree from an ALA-accredited program were White. The overall percentage of Whites holding a graduate degree in library science may be even higher. In 2019–2020, the most recent year for which data are available, 72 percent of MLIS recipients, including those from non-ALA accredited programs, were White, according to the United States Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

The discussion of pipeline problems generally places an undue burden on historically marginalized populations for their lack of representation in the field, thereby further “othering” underrepresented librarians by treating them as essentially different. There are many reasons why diversification has failed for decades. According to Alex Poole and his coauthors, “Diversity and social justice educational efforts remain cyclical, reactive, short-lived, and indirect.” Examination of the failure to diversify librarianship is not new or even recent. As far back as 1978, an article in the Journal of Education for Librarianship talked about fit within the profession, though without using that word: “In the United States, almost everyone knows that a librarian is a middle-aged, white woman . . . few other occupations are more middle-aged, more female and/or more white.”
Perpetuating this cultural persona of the librarian is institutional racism, which abounds in education. The lack of funds to help students from historically marginalized groups achieve a high school diploma, then an undergraduate degree, and finally a graduate education prevents true diversification of librarianship and other careers that require advanced education.16

Even when Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) possess the preliminary education to begin an MLIS program, they might avoid a career where no one else looks like them.17 Therefore, before members of a hiring committee wring their hands and bemoan the lack of diversity in the applicant pool, they must stop and consider why this issue exists. Those involved in hiring must regularly confront, examine, and discuss this challenge. Further, they must commit their institution and its resources to meaningful change that will help increase future diversity.

The Notion of “Fit”

Setting aside the issue of the pipeline, what role does the hiring committee itself play in potentially limiting diversity in librarianship? The answer often relies on what the group does to address fit. Though a committee might try to quantify its ideal candidate with measurable categories, such as job skills, years of experience, or expertise that will help promote the institutional mission, fit tends to be subjective. To a search committee, fit often means an applicant who looks like, talks like, and has similar experiences to most people already employed by the institution. The committee will rely not on its quantified list of requirements and job-related attributes, but instead will revert to personal and idiosyncratic preferences to select the final candidate.18

Given what is already known about librarianship—that it is majority White and female19—those who do not fall neatly into those two categories may have difficulty demonstrating fit to the committee. Candidates might feel compelled to act a role to prove that they fit at the institution, rather than presenting their authentic self. If a BIPOC candidate is hired, they may find themselves the only person who looks like them in a room, in a department, or at a conference. They may be derided by others as a “diversity hire,” and their expertise, experience, and skills may be ignored or minimized.20 The newly hired librarian may continually strive to conform to the institution’s idea of fit to court acceptance that may never be given. They will remain an outsider until they choose to leave, as the institution will not change to embrace them or those like them.21

Diversity Efforts in Library Organizations

In recognition of the need to diversify the profession, the ALA strategic plan affirms the organization’s commitment to diversity as a key action area.22 The plan notes that training should be conducted to recruit and retain historically marginalized individuals in the library profession to better represent the populations it serves. As noted earlier, however, librarianship remains overwhelmingly White. Among ALA’s strategies to increase diversity among its members is to strengthen professional development opportunities on recruitment; to enhance initiatives such as the Spectrum Scholarship Program, which provides financial aid to minority students; and to ensure the incorporation of diversity, equity, and inclusion practices into all divisions, sections, and roundtables.23
As more evidence emerges that hiring practices in libraries contribute to a lack of diversity, library organizations have released guides to help institutions reevaluate their practices to increase inclusion and equity for job candidates. Core: Leadership, Infrastructure, Futures, a division of ALA, notes in its “Best Practices for Academic Interviews” that developing and implementing hiring practices that are inclusive and that discourage assessment for “fit” will allow consideration of skills and expertise rather than subjective qualities. Similarly, the CARL (Canadian Association of Research Libraries) guidelines “Strategies and Practices for Hiring and Retaining Diverse Talent” encourage institutions to perform a diversity hiring audit of their recruitment and retention procedures.

True diversity in an organization is not limited strictly to racial variety. In their systematic review “Diversity Initiatives to Recruit and Retain Academic Librarians,” Janice Kung, K-Lee Fraser, and Dee Winn note that many institutions focus their inclusion efforts solely on race. They may view racial variation as an achievable metric, easier to accomplish than true consideration of intersecting identities, which include such factors as gender, ethnicity, class, disability, and sexuality. This lack of intersectional diversity will continue to limit the variety of the profession unless it begins to more broadly define and evaluate inclusion in librarianship.

**MLIS Requirements**

Many library positions specify “ALA-accredited MLIS or equivalent degree” as a job requirement. However, the hiring committee should evaluate each position to determine if an advanced degree is truly necessary to fulfill the role. Because of the expense and time required to obtain an advanced degree, many prospective librarians may not or cannot seek graduate education. Thus, they are not considered for job openings, though they may possess other qualifications and experience that qualify them as candidates. A preconceived hierarchy in MLIS education places greater value on in-person degree programs, which can negatively impact students and their career trajectories. Degree-granting institutions must consider more flexible, cost-effective options that can accommodate students whose economic or family situation may make higher education difficult. Further, the cost of degrees can vary widely. Tuition price often becomes shorthand for institutional prestige and program quality. Search committees and hiring managers may view expensive programs as more reputable and in-person offerings as more rigorous than online programs. These assumptions lead them to scrutinize candidates based on the applicant’s alma mater rather than experience and skills and to ignore the idea that ALA accreditation should make MLIS programs generally equivalent in terms of educational preparation.

Angela Galvan describes the disdain toward online MLIS programs in her article “Soliciting Performance, Hiding Bias: Whiteness in Librarianship.” She notes that some hiring managers mistakenly claim that students in online programs cannot work in teams or learn as effectively as students do in person. Galvan encourages library managers to consider who may be advantaged by pursuing an online MLIS rather than upholding the in-person degree program as the standard. Additionally, those in positions of power should reconsider requiring an “MLIS or equivalent degree” to fill positions and think about the barriers that might prevent individuals from obtaining an advanced degree.
As the accrediting body, ALA should examine how equitable the learning modalities are in degree programs and play a more prominent role in communicating parity between programs to hiring institutions.

The Hiring Process

The Search Committee

At the authors’ institution, the search committee reviews the proposed job advertisement and determines the evaluation criteria for librarian openings. In this regard, candidates interact with the committee even before they have direct contact with anyone from the institution. It is therefore critical that great thought and consideration go into the formation of the committee and the beginning of its work. To truly value diversity and equity in the search process, the committee itself must have both. At the least, libraries should strive to have a range of ranks and job functions represented on their committees.

If an institution employs few people from historically marginalized groups, those individuals may frequently be asked to serve on committees to ensure representation, placing undue burdens on them. Managers and administrators should evaluate the equity of search committee responsibilities across the institution to avoid this problem.

When serving on a search committee, it is important to take stock of the members’ identities and positionalities, the social and political context that shapes their identities and their views of the world. Consider how potential candidates may differ from the individuals on the search committee. Interrogate any assumptions that could negatively impact applicants whose experiences may not match those of the people on the committee. Make time throughout the search process to discuss the group identities of committee members and how to ensure their experiences and assumptions will not negatively impact candidates from other backgrounds.

A good charge meeting, a kickoff session to inform the search committee about its goals and obligations, is fundamental. Expectations for behavior, communication, and the essential, quantifiable qualifications of candidates should be determined at this meeting. The charge meeting will prepare for the creation of a rubric or other evaluation tool that sets measurable expectations for evaluating the candidates.

Job Advertisements and Candidate Selection

Job postings should be consistent across the organization. When writing a position advertisement, review other current ads, make sure to use inclusive language, and provide helpful information for candidates unfamiliar with the institution, as well as resources that might help them make informed decisions about applying. Details about the job functions and hiring process should be included, such as required and preferred qualifications, pay range (if the parent institution permits), application deadlines and review dates, and location. If institutional policies prohibit posting this information in job advertisements, faculty governance should take up the issue to make changes. Many hiring sites, specifically those that focus on historically underrepresented groups in librarianship, now require salary ranges and other information to be included before jobs may be posted to their platforms. After reviewing the advertisement, the candidates
should know how and when the interviews may begin and in what modality they will take place. This information will assist candidates in making informed decisions about applying for the position and help them set their expectations for the process.

Search committee members should consider who may be disadvantaged by required qualifications and discuss which prerequisites are essential. For example, is an advanced degree truly needed to fulfill the job functions? If weekend or evening work is mentioned, is it negotiable, or will there be a firmly established schedule for those who need to plan childcare? Is remote work a possibility? If there is potential flexibility in these requirements, revise the qualifications accordingly.

Additionally, a rubric should be used across the organization to assess candidates on the required and preferred qualifications and only on those attributes. Assessment criteria should be measurable, and they should be clearly communicated to all committee members at the beginning of the application review process. For example, if using a rubric as an assessment tool, it is much more equitable to assess candidates for their demonstrated experience rather than their “understanding” of specific concepts or skills.

The Interview Process

Many institutions were forced into a hiring freeze at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. After job postings began appearing again, the ongoing pandemic caused many institutions to hold interviews online rather than in person. Although a virtual interview may not work well for everyone, these changes allowed library professionals to rethink search procedures and how candidates might be better accommodated during the search process. For example, travel may be a burden to some candidates, especially if they must prepay expenses and wait to be reimbursed by the institution. For many, especially those just starting their careers, costly travel is not financially feasible. For candidates with children or other people needing care, such as elderly relatives, taking three or four days to travel and visit a location is difficult.

If the parent institution permits, the option to interview virtually should be offered to all candidates. An invitation to visit in person may be extended once the applicant accepts or provisionally accepts the position. Alternatives to visiting may include providing job seekers with campus and local area information resources, pictures, and video tours. Once candidates are selected for the interview stage, provide them with accessibility and lodging advice as part of the interview scheduling process. Do not rely on the applicant to disclose disabilities or to request special accommodations; instead, ask if any additional adjustments may be needed. Operate with accessibility as the default for all candidates.

Providing candidates with the opportunity to interview virtually may also lessen concerns such as participating in meal interviews in which their dietary needs may not be met. Also, because meal interviews often serve a meet and greet function, they pressure the candidate to remain “on” as if giving a performance. Breakfast, lunch, or dinner interviews ultimately have nothing to do with assessing how a candidate could fulfill the requirements of the position, and they may, intentionally or not, suggest evaluating applicants for fit. When interviewing candidates on-site, be sure to consider breaks carefully; do not place the burden of asking on the job seeker, who might feel uncomfortable requesting a recess, even if needed. Show the candidates areas where
they can decompress and rest, such as a quiet place to eat a snack or make a phone call. Also, ensure the candidates know the locations of restrooms and drinking water.

The Virtual Interview

Before a virtual interview, provide the candidate with as much assistance as possible to ensure their comfort with the conferencing technology. Applicants may need a guide on how to best utilize the technology. Incorporate adequate break periods into virtual interview schedules to combat “meeting fatigue.” As with in-person interviews, provide time between meetings for the applicants. Do not schedule back-to-back sessions, which might make it difficult for them to use the restroom or simply collect their thoughts. Also, candidates will require time to eat a meal or attend to other matters.

The search committee chair or another colleague should be present at the beginning of every meeting to introduce the candidate to members of the interview panel and to ensure proper technology connectivity. Also, that person can remind participants of when the meeting ends to make sure candidates get a break. Allow time for the applicants to prepare for their presentations and to ask any last-minute questions. Another member of the search committee or a colleague facilitating the search process should moderate the question-and-answer portion after the presentation. Finally, a last meeting with the search chair should allow the candidate an idea of the final timeline for the hiring process.

Conclusion

Candidates for positions at your institution may spend a good deal of time researching and preparing for interviews. Search committees should repay these efforts with their own research and preparation to ensure that the process is fair and equitable. Everyone within an organization and on a hiring committee can advocate for practices that increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in the process. Everyone has the ability—and the responsibility—to speak up when they notice something problematic. Institutions should include more information in position announcements, offer more options for interview modalities, and provide more resources to finalists to assist them in making the life-changing decision to join a particular library community. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that libraries can make these changes. It would be unfortunate to turn our backs on the progress made and the conversations started.

As the literature shows, the library profession has grappled with a lack of inclusion for decades. More must be done to achieve the goal of more diverse libraries, which will “look like America.” Progress will come only if hiring committees follow recruitment, selection, and interview practices that increase diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is time to do better.

Carmen Cole is an information sciences and business liaison librarian in the William and Joan Schreyer Business Library at Penn State University Park; she may be reached by e-mail at: CCC143@psu.edu.

Emily Mross is a business librarian and library outreach coordinator in the Hanes Library at Penn State Harrisburg; she may be reached by e-mail at: ELM43@psu.edu.
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Notes


7. Sensoy and DiAngelo, “‘We Are All for Diversity, but . . .’”


23. ALA, “American Library Association Strategic Directions.”


27. Kung, Fraser, and Winn, “Diversity Initiatives to Recruit and Retain Academic Librarians.”


