An Unconventional Interviewing Process at an Academic Library

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abstract: Confronted with two faculty vacancies to fill and a desire to minimize burnout among the remaining library staff throughout the search process, the Eccles Health Sciences Library at the University of Utah employed an interview method seldom utilized in academic libraries. The library's search committee arranged on-site group interviews that hosted multiple candidates simultaneously. Careful scheduling ensured that each candidate received sufficient individual attention and assessment, while also enabling the committee to evaluate the group dynamics and interpersonal skills of the applicants.

Introduction

What causes an academic library to depart from the standard faculty recruitment and interviewing process? For the Spencer S. Eccles Health Sciences Library (EHSL) at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, a number of factors influenced the decision. First, two simultaneous faculty departures resulted in a pair of vacancies to fill. Second, while this scenario would typically necessitate separate search committees for each vacant position, EHSL was already shorthanded and many of its employees suffered from burnout, making it unrealistic to devote additional staff time to serving on search committees. EHSL wanted to bring new faculty on board as quickly and efficiently as possible to alleviate the workload of existing staff, who had been covering additional assignments. Faced with the need to recruit, interview, evaluate, and hire two faculty members in a short time, the search committee decided to experiment with arranging on-site group interviews that hosted multiple candidates simultaneously. The committee's objectives were to: (1) shorten the time between posting the open positions and extending final job offers; (2) avoid exacerbating staff burnout during the search process; and (3) ensure each candidate received sufficient undivided time and attention for a fair and thorough evaluation. This article describes the decision-making process, implementation steps, and outcomes of the library's group interview process.

Background

EHSL stands in the geographic center of the University of Utah's Health Sciences Campus and at the heart of the university's educational, health care, and research efforts. Its staff and resources support the Schools of Medicine and Dentistry; the Colleges of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Health; and the university's hospitals and clinics. In July 2017, 10 tenure-line faculty librarians delivered clinical, research, and education support to these entities, with most assistance provided by five librarians in the Education and Research Department. By July 2018, the number of tenure-line librarians had dwindled to seven, with only two remaining in the Education and Research Department. This short staffing severely hampered efforts to fulfill the library's responsibilities for teaching, outreach, orientation, and consultations.

During this same period, the Resiliency Center, part of the University of Utah's Office of Wellness and Integrative Health, began to assess job-related stress and burnout among health sciences faculty, including those at EHSL. The results of a survey conducted in fall 2017 revealed that 73 percent of EHSL faculty suffered from burnout. This rate was more than double the national average of 30 percent and significantly higher than colleagues in the next highest department, Radiology, which reported a burnout rate of 54 percent. While numerous factors contributed to the librarians' fatigue and discouragement, "feeling stressed" and having "limited control" over one's workload were cited as major drivers.[1]

Given this environment, EHSL was faced with the question: "How do we increase our staffing levels—which will ultimately reduce workloads, and thus burnout, among our current faculty—without increasing stress levels during the labor-intensive recruiting and hiring process?" Faculty hires over the previous six years had taken an average of 131 days from the job posting to when the library extended a final employment offer. The library hoped to shorten that time without sacrificing the quality of the search experience, both for the candidates and the existing members of the library. This desire led the search committee to ask: "How do we condense the steps in the search process without depriving candidates of the opportunity to evaluate the library as a potential workplace or undermining the library's ability to evaluate the candidates as potential colleagues?"

Literature Review

Therese Macan describes the employment interview as "a social interaction where the interviewer and applicant exchange and process the information gathered from each other," measuring the applicant's cognitive ability, personality, and potential job performance.[2] Much of the research literature on the employment interview process discusses the predictive validity of the structured interview. Such an interview can be defined by identifying the elements, or constructs, that make up the content of the meeting and the evaluation of the applicant.[3] A seminal article by Michael Campion asks, among other questions, "Is the same interview content elicited and is the evaluation process consistent each time by the interviewer?" and "Will candidates view the interview process positively?"[4] An unstructured exchange can be valuable for establishing a rapport between interviewers and interviewees, but critics of this method point out that it allows biases to skew decision-making. Also, interviewees can engage in impression management,

a conscious or unconscious effort to influence how others perceive them, including self-promotion and ingratiation. Candidates' tactics could be forthright or misleading, portraying a positive image without being dishonest or with a premeditated intention to deceive.[5] Studies on the decision-making process in job interviews suggest that structured interviews lead to more measured decision-making, while unstructured interviews can result in quick, but not necessarily effective, choices.[6] Rachel Frieder hypothesized that the factors which influence decision-making include question sophistication, question consistency, rapport building, interviewer efficacy, interviewer experience and training, and the order in which interviewers work with a cohort of candidates.[7] A 2005 study by Frederick Morgeson, Matthew Reider, and Michael Campion supported the value of the structured interview for effective decision-making. These authors found that structured interviews had high predictive value for determining knowledge and performance in a team setting.[8]

The literature contains several descriptive studies about interviewing multiple candidates simultaneously; however, there is little consensus on terminology. *Group interview*, *panel interview*, and *seminar interview* are all terms used to describe the practice of bringing in multiple candidates for simultaneous evaluation.[9] The reasons to interview multiple candidates at the same time include to observe interactions between them,[10] to measure the candidates' people skills,[11] and to allow interviewers to evaluate multiple applicants quickly.[12] Group assessments have been shown to predict workplace success in teachers.[13]

Group interviews can be an uncomfortable experience for applicants, although planning can mitigate the discomfort. Mary Kunz's 2007 thesis examined the experiences of applicants for a leadership role at a university. The participants were concerned about having insufficient time to show their strengths. Interestingly, most of the candidates recommended using group interviews for roles with significant team-oriented responsibilities, provided candidates had opportunities to interact individually with interviewers.[14]

In health sciences, the multiple mini interview is a structured group interview format that has met with great success. In such an interview, applicants go from station to station for a series of short meetings with different assessors. The meetings often include group discussions and panel interviews. This technique has been found reliable and valid at assessing cultural fit and predicting success in clinical performance exams.[15] A 2018 study found that this approach shortened the time for hiring nurses while improving the candidate pool by making the interview less intimidating.[16] Nurses who would be good candidates felt more comfortable meeting with individual interviewers than presenting to a panel and, like their interviewers, wanted to minimize time away from work.

Much has been written about the selection and hiring process, but little is meant for the search committee at an academic library. Advice for such searches can be gleaned from a 2009 article by Charles Gilreath, Christine Foster, Leslie Reynolds, and Sandra Tucker, in which the authors recommend forming a standing search committee to "shorten the time-to-hire, to rationalize the search process generally, and to conduct all professional searches."[17] In a 2008 article in the *Law Library Journal*, Ronald Wheeler, Nancy Johnson, and Terrance Manion suggest some best practices regarding the size of the candidate pool, scheduling the on-site interview and events for the day, and whom to include in the interview process.[18] In 2003, Gregory Raschke found inherent inefficiencies in

the 10 basic components of the traditional academic librarian hiring process. Raschke recommended solutions he referred to as a "risk-accepting model" for finding the top candidate, such as smaller search committees, flexible job descriptions, emphasis on professional development and organizational success to recruit a better candidate pool, and moving quickly through the review process.[19] While the literature provides some guidelines for academic library hiring and selection, there is little information regarding a multiple simultaneous evaluation for academic librarian candidates. With this article, the authors aim to add to the literature by sharing the process and results of a group interview experience at an academic health sciences library.

Methods

On March 14, 2018, a search committee consisting of three library faculty, one full-time library staff member, and one faculty member from the College of Nursing was formed to oversee the recruitment and hiring process for two faculty vacancies in the Eccles Health Sciences Library. The job posting for the open positions was published to multiple venues on April 2. Over the next 30 days, EHSL received 26 applications from individuals interested in the advertised roles. The committee identified 11 candidates to invite to initial screening interviews, to be conducted via phone or videoconferencing.

Screening interviews commenced on May 8, 2018, and concluded 12 days later. The committee wanted to consolidate these interviews into an even tighter timeframe but had to accommodate the annual meetings of both the Medical Library Association and the statewide Utah Library Association, which created scheduling conflicts for not only the search committee but also many job applicants.

As the search committee screened candidates and identified finalists, the chair proposed inviting the finalists in groups for the following round of on-site interviews, rather than hosting each candidate individually. This interview method has been helpful in education programs—indeed, performance in group assessment predicted teacher success better than any other measured variable.[20] The group interview process for teachers seeks to assess personality factors and teamwork, which were also important in the EHSL search.[21] Zipora Shechtman's work focuses on group assessment methods involving a high level of structure.[22] The multiple mini interview is also highly structured and seeks to provide multifaceted views of candidates quickly from similar numbers of evaluators.[23] Hoping to learn from other academic institutions that had engaged recently in a group interview process, the search committee chair contacted the University of Colorado Strauss Health Sciences Library in Aurora and the University of Wyoming Libraries in Laramie to discuss logistics, outcomes, and lessons learned.[24]

The feedback from the Colorado and Wyoming libraries was largely positive, and both institutions indicated willingness to consider the group interview format for future hiring opportunities. The one area of concern, expressed by some Colorado applicants, was that all candidates were assigned the same topic on which to prepare a presentation. On the interview day, the presentations were shared sequentially in a communal setting. This meant that the individuals scheduled to speak later in the rotation were confronted with the possibility of repeating information or reiterating insights already shared by the previous presenters. This heightened anxiety for the candidates and was reported as a

negative aspect of the group interview experience. Timothy Tran and Melinda Blackman studied group interviews and concluded that applicants' perception of fairness in such interviews is influenced by the order in which questions are asked and presentations are given.[25] Furthermore, applicants' perception of impartiality in the selection process may influence their opinion of the hiring organization and their inclination to accept or reject a job offer.[26] The EHSL search committee intended to assign substantially similar presentation topics to the finalists. Based on the feedback from the Colorado cohort and the work of Tran and Blackman, the search committee decided to proceed with a group interview only if each presentation occurred without the other candidates in the audience.

The search committee drew up a schedule that called for the library to host two groups of three candidates each per day. The plan allowed 8.5 hours of contact with each candidate. This included a dinner the night before the interview, followed by a day of activities, such as a library tour, meeting with the staff, lunch with the faculty, unstructured interviews with various departments and committees, structured interviews with the search committee, and a formal presentation to invited members of the campus community (see Figure 1). This plan would give the committee and other evaluators a chance to get to know the candidates, and vice versa.[27]

Master Interview Schedule – ALL 3 CANDIDATES

Sunday, June 24th

5:30 – 7:00pm	Dinner w/ Search Committee Rep	Restaurant TBD

Monday, June 25th

9:00 – 9:30am	Meet & Greet w/Search Committee (coffee, bagels, fruit)	Eccles Library	ALL CANDIDATES TOGETHER
9:30 – 10:55am	Presentation	History of Medicine Room	Candidates 1, 2, 3 rotate
9:30 – 10:55am	Library Tour w/staff member	Eccles Library	Candidates 1, 2, 3 rotate
9:30 – 10:55am	HR & RPT Discussion	EHSL 105	Candidates 1, 2, 3 rotate
11:00 – 11:25am	BREAK	On own	Each candidate assigned office for personal use
11:30 – 12:45pm	LUNCH w/ faculty	History of Medicine Room - catered	ALL CANDIDATES TOGETHER
12:45 – 12:55	BREAK	On own	Each candidate assigned office for personal use
1:00 – 2:40pm	Meet w/RED team	Eccles Library	Candidates 1, 2, 3 rotate
1:00 – 2:40pm	Meet w/RML & NTO	Eccles Library	Candidates 1, 2, 3 rotate
1:00 – 2:40pm	Meet w/ Search Committee	Eccles Library	Candidates 1, 2, 3 rotate
2:40 – 2:55pm	BREAK	On own	Each candidate assigned office for personal use
3:00 – 4:00	Group Discussion Staff meet & greet	Eccles - snacks	ALL CANDIDATES TOGETHER

Figure 1. A typical schedule with a combination of joint and individual activities by which the Eccles Health Sciences Library at the University of Utah interviewed multiple candidates for two open positions simultaneously.

The search committee chair designed an agenda that incorporated all desired activities within the allotted time while also preserving a significant portion of the day during which each candidate received undivided attention from the library faculty and staff. Broadly speaking, the candidates would interact with library staff and with one another during events that were informal and social in nature, whereas formal evaluative encounters would occur without other candidates present. This procedure differs from many other group interviews, especially in education, where all candidates may be evaluated on group discussions of substantial issues.[28] A structure like the multiple mini interview would allow many different facilitators to offer input on the candidates, which can help equalize differences in candidates' sex, age, race, and other categories.[29]

Candidates who interact with one another benefit from seeing who else applied for the role.[30] While such encounters can be stressful to the applicants, the literature indicates that they often report positive outcomes to meeting their competitors, who are, after all, people with similar interests.[31]

After reviewing the proposed schedule, the search committee agreed to move forward with bringing in two groups of three candidates for simultaneous evaluation. On June 1, 2018, the six final candidates were notified of their selection to participate in an on-site interview. Three candidates were invited to visit on June 25; the other three were asked to come on June 27. The initial communication included information about the activities that would comprise the interview process, as well as specific instructions about the topic, scope, and audience for the formal presentation. After accepting the invitation to take part in the on-site interview, each candidate was e-mailed a detailed agenda that explained how the interview day would unfold and told that they would be one of three applicants hosted on the same day. None of the candidates expressed alarm to the search committee or chose to withdraw from consideration, and only two asked for additional information about the group interview process. The committee chair focused on transparency in these interactions, as one published case study emphasized the importance of adequate communication in putting candidates at ease. The study also highlighted the candidates' wish to be heard, their hope for the power to make choices, and their desire for belonging as they find their place in the group of candidates.[32]

After each day of interviews, library faculty and staff were asked to provide feedback on each candidate's strengths and weaknesses. After all the interviews, each candidate was requested to give anonymous feedback on the interview process by responding to a short survey.[33] Library faculty and staff were also asked to share their opinions on the group interview experience.[34]

The search committee compiled its report and submitted its recommendations to the library director, who made final selections on July 10, 2018. The Faculty Appointment Advisory Committee voted on each nominated applicant a week later. The final step in the hiring process came on July 25, when the director sent job offer letters to the two selected candidates, and both accepted.

Outcomes

EHSL utilized a group interview method with three objectives in mind: (1) shorten the time to fill the openings; (2) minimize staff burnout during the search; and (3) ensure

each candidate received adequate attention. The library's post-interview assessment process considered the extent to which each of these goals was achieved.

Shortened Hiring Timeline

The committee reviewed the hiring timeline for the previous six years and found that eight faculty hires took an average of 131 days from the time a position was advertised to when the selected candidate received an offer letter. With two open faculty spots to fill, it was reasonable to expect that the entire process would take at least that long and maybe more. Instead, by utilizing one search committee and bringing in multiple candidates for simultaneous evaluation, the library shortened the time from job posting to job offer to 115 days. Given that this was a dual hire, shortening the timeline by 16 days was a significant accomplishment.

Minimized Staff Burnout

At the time a decision was made to recruit and hire two librarians, the library had a total of 10 faculty members available to serve on the necessary search committees. The department's practice for faculty hires is to assemble a search committee of five people—three faculty members from the library, one staff member from the library, and one faculty representative from another department. Convening a separate search committee for both open positions would have required significant time commitments from six professional librarians—or 60 percent of the library's faculty. This procedure would have placed an undue burden both on the faculty serving on the committees and on their colleagues who would have to pick up their work assignments. Instead, the new procedure minimized the faculty and staff devoted to the recruitment and interviewing process. Other group interview formats, such as multiple mini interviews, have also been found less time-consuming than traditional interviews.[35]

The comments shared by those who responded to the post-interview survey suggest that the committee also met its goal of minimizing burnout among library faculty and staff. Remarks included:

> With grouped interviews, the EHSL staff/faculty seemed more engaged both days. Two focused days of interviews was less tiring, and allowed us to be more focused on the candidates and interviewing.

> I felt much more involved in the process than in a typical search, and I really liked that.

> The group interview model allowed us to get through the six candidates more efficiently, with less burnout and more focus.

Adequate Individual Attention

The interview day format called for 8.5 hours of interaction between the candidate and the library. The agenda ensured that each individual received 5.75 hours of undivided attention, during which they were the only candidate present for a given activity. In other words, the applicant had two-thirds of the total time to interact with library staff one-on-one.

Post-interview feedback from the candidates indicated that they were satisfied with the time they had to make their case and be evaluated as an individual. All "strongly agreed" with the statements: "I had adequate individual attention from the Search Committee"; "I had adequate individual attention from the Library faculty and staff"; "I had adequate time to 'make my case' or 'stand out' during the group interview"; and "I had time throughout the day to ask my own questions." These responses resembled those of the teacher candidates in Shosh Leshem's study, who felt the group interview was a positive experience, both from meeting the other candidates and having an opportunity to express themselves.[36] Indeed, the applicants enjoyed meeting other candidates, which is also shown in the literature.[37] Based on this positive feedback, the search committee concluded that the library had successfully achieved its objective of ensuring sufficient individual attention for each candidate.

Discussion

EHSL staff responded unanimously in the affirmative when asked to respond to the following survey question: "The Library should consider holding group interview sessions for future faculty searches." Several factors and unique circumstances combined to make the first group interview experience successful.

Success Factors

Scheduling three candidates on a single day called for strict adherence to a tight timeline of events, as individuals rotated through activities during dedicated blocks of time throughout the day. EHSL could stick to the agenda since all final candidates lived in proximity to the library, thus eliminating potential travel delays that might have interfered with the orderly unfolding of scheduled events. In future faculty hiring opportunities, any decision to utilize a group interview process might need to grapple with the logistical challenges and uncertainties that accompany interstate travel by some applicants.

EHSL's decision to experiment with a group interview format was also influenced by the fact that two candidates would be selected for hire. The perception was that the candidates would be more engaged with one another knowing that they were interacting with a possible future colleague—not just a competitor for a single spot within the library. In the post-interview assessment, several candidates mentioned that knowing the library would make more than one hiring offer lessened the anxiety about meeting and interacting with other applicants. As one individual noted: "Because there are two slots available, I liked the idea of meeting someone who might end up being my coworker, should I get an offer."

The library was fortunate to have a strong pool of well-qualified candidates. In the past, the lengthy timeframe required by the traditional individual interview approach resulted in several highly rated applicants withdrawing from consideration due to a job offer from another institution. The consolidated group interview approach had no candidate withdrawals because of other job offers.

Lessons Learned

Based on feedback from library faculty and staff, as well as observations throughout the interview days, the number and quality of interactions with candidates improved compared to those in the library's standard process. Past experiences, in which candidates were brought in one at a time, resulted in diminishing levels of energy as the process wore on. Candidates who met with library faculty and staff early encountered a more energized and involved team, whereas applicants who visited the library later may have interacted with a group who appeared fatigued and disengaged. By bringing the candidates on site in two cohorts, the library ensured that all of them met with a similarly engaged group of assessors.

Recommendations

Based on the successful achievement of the library's objectives in utilizing a group interview format, the authors offer the following recommendations to other institutions interested in experimenting with this interview method.

Recommendation 1: Strive for as much transparency as possible. The recruitment and hiring process is all about trust and credibility. Build that trust by being open and clear with applicants about your rationale for hosting multiple simultaneous candidates. This explanation will set realistic expectations and help avoid disappointments or unwelcome surprises. EHSL shared its reasoning for utilizing a group interview format and invited candidates to review the assessment metrics by which they would be evaluated.

Recommendation 2: Communicate as often as possible. The EHSL search committee chair corresponded with each candidate an average of six times throughout the process and shared information about the open positions and the library's plans and goals for these new roles. On a more practical note, the chair provided specifics about the library's culture, dress code, construction detours, parking options, and logistical details of the interview day schedule. Several candidates expressed their appreciation in the post-interview survey, noting: "The thorough communication was very helpful so I knew what to expect" and "The e-mails . . . were so informative that I felt like nothing was left to chance and I had little to worry about. I really benefited from that close communication."

Recommendation 3: Provide the candidates with a copy of the interview questions prior to the interview day. This will allow them to formulate thoughtful responses and may alleviate some anxiety about the process. Based on Jennifer Vinopal's 2016 work, which suggested that having the questions in advance of an interview is a viable tactic for reducing bias, EHSL opted to use this approach as part of the group interview experience.[38] Applicants received a list of questions before the initial screening interviews, and finalists were given additional questions that would be asked during their on-site visit. In the post-interview survey, candidates commented: "I appreciated having most of the questions in advance, so my responses could be more thoughtful and less affected by interview nerves."

Recommendation 4: Build time in the schedule for breaks. Downtime is important to allow candidates time to relax and turn their focus away from the scrutiny of the

search committee and the hiring organization. Pauses are especially important during an unconventional interview process, when the format itself has the potential to increase candidates' anxiety. In the post-interview survey, one candidate commented: "Thank you for the use of a private office during break times. As an introvert, I found it helpful to have time to recharge in between all the group and interpersonal activities. It allowed me to present my best self throughout the day."

Recommendation 5: Make individual assessment time a priority. Job interviews are intensely personal, and the organization should honor the candidates' individuality by ensuring each has sufficient one-on-one time with members of the search committee and others who will evaluate them. In putting together an agenda for the interview day, focus on establishing sufficient individual assessment time first, then schedule group activities in the remaining available time slots.

Conclusion

The traditional recruitment and hiring process in academic libraries is time-consuming and labor-intensive. Drawbacks to this approach include exacerbating burnout among existing faculty and staff and losing desirable candidates to other institutions because of the time lapse between the job posting and the hiring decision.

The group interview process is a viable alternative to traditional interviewing formats. Benefits include a shortened timeline, decreased burden on existing library staff, and increased engagement with the process for all involved. The group interview process is replicable at other academic institutions and should be considered by future search committees.

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