INTEGRATING ANTI-BIAS STRATEGIES IN LIBRARY FACULTY HIRING AND EVALUATION

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Libraries, and especially academic libraries, are racialized organizations that privilege demographic and socio-cultural whiteness. As in other racialized organizations, this is evident in, among other attributes, bureaucratic processes and standards presented as neutral that instead serve to disadvantage, and even harm, library workers of color, by “launder[ing] racial domination [through] obscuring or legitimating unequal processes.” Within the context of libraries’ ongoing efforts—and failures—to recruit and retain library workers of color, the supposedly neutral bureaucratic structures that shape hiring and evaluation processes have received increasing attention over the past decade. This is particularly true for academic libraries, in which library faculty hiring and review processes are often complex and infused with the racialized meritocratic principles of their parent institutions—leading to implicit and explicit barriers and unequal burdens for librarians of color, both in being hired and in being evaluated for continuing appointment or promotion.

To address this, many academic libraries are actively engaged in examining both their hiring and librarian review processes for structural biases that privilege, and thus reinforce and replicate, historically normative, racialized ideas of academic librarianship. Although acknowledged as connected, these efforts are often approached independently—for example, with individual library committees or workgroups focused specifically on reviewing recruitment practices. However, because the core assumptions, ensuing issues, and potential anti-bias and anti-racist strategies for both academic librarian hiring and evaluation processes are similar, libraries—and the librarians they are seeking to recruit and retain—would be best served through a coordinated approach that creates more equitable and inclusive hiring and evaluation processes that inform and reinforce one another. As Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro observe in their analysis of whiteness in academic libraries: “all fronts must be acted on simultaneously, because just as the mechanisms of oppression are interlocking, resistance to them must also be complex and interwoven.”

STRUCTURAL SIMILARITIES

Although they are governed by separate sets of policies and procedures, and frequently engage different (if overlapping) sets of individuals, both academic librarian hiring and review for con-

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** Throughout the paper, we will use “librarian” to refer to any librarians, whether or not they explicitly hold faculty status/rank, who are reviewed for continuing appointments, tenure, and/or promotion.
tinuing appointment or promotion are similar evaluative processes that involve the subjective application of an explicit set of criteria to determine the value of a librarian’s actual and/or potential accomplishments to a specific academic library. These bureaucratic structures for both librarian hiring and review share four attributes that, while presented as serving principles of fair and ‘objective’ evaluation, combine to create a context in which libraries are more likely to replicate our historical whiteness through hiring decisions and assessments of librarians’ work based on exclusionary standards of ‘merit.’

At the core of both hiring and review processes is a set of policies and related documentation which outline the criteria, and underlying standards, upon which librarians are to be evaluated—whether to gain entry to an organization, or to gain continued employment or advancement within it. In current examinations of academic faculty hiring and evaluation processes—which most academic libraries emulate—these policies and criteria are repeatedly identified as potential sites of both implicit and explicit structural bias in the work that they do and do not acknowledge or reward. In both hiring and review processes, these policies are interpreted and applied by committees composed of librarians’ peers and/or supervisors (in this case of hiring committees, this may be expanded to include others from within the larger institution, such as academic faculty or students). As noted with regard to faculty evaluation committees, decisions as to who may serve on these committees has implications for the homogeneity of viewpoints and inter-group power dynamics that are present when considering a candidate’s materials for hiring or advancement. This possibility for individual interpretation of evaluative criteria—in applying the stated policies and requirements to an assessment of the materials provided by job candidates or librarians under review—is also a shared attribute of these processes which, if not intentionally mitigated, can lead to the subjective and inconsistent application of criteria by committee members. Finally, both evaluative processes usually incorporate external perspectives; whether it is through references informing a hiring decision or external letters informing a review process, the committees evaluating librarians regularly solicit (and rely upon) input from external individuals. While potentially valuable, the information (or opinions) provided introduce potential sites of bias.

**SHARED CHALLENGES TO EQUITY**

As noted above, the shared structures of both academic librarian hiring and review processes introduce distinct challenges to equity that, as cautioned by Posselt et al. with regard to faculty evaluation in general, can “reinforce extant power relations by applying criteria and processes that systematically privilege already advantaged actors, organizations, and knowledge.” Understanding the specific ways in which these commonly-used structures can reinforce the whiteness and cultural homogeneity in academic libraries is critical for identifying effective strategies for working against systemic bias and racism.

**Policies and Documentation**

For both hiring and review, the committee and candidate rely on a set of documented evaluative criteria. In a hiring process, these criteria are contained in the job description and job ad, detailing who should apply and what qualifications are expected of a candidate. In a review process, the documentation might be the faculty handbook or tenure or promotion guidelines that describe the desired skills and experience of a successful candidate for continuing appointment or promotion. In both cases, the policies and documentation that underlie these evaluative processes implicitly state which individuals are expected to succeed by detailing the standards on which candidates will be judged.

While often presented as objective, these stated standards cannot be considered to be neutral and equitable for all candidates. At best, they are often uncritically used and re-used throughout evaluative processes, even as library work changes and our understanding of potential bias risks grows over time. But additionally, these criteria may contain gendered or race-coded language as well as expectations or qualifications that advantage White candidates, thus embedding bias into the process. In librarian continuing appointment or promotion processes, this potential for bias may appear in descriptions of what constitutes valid scholarship or service to qualify for advancement, or even the “collegiality” of the person being evaluated. Hiring processes rely on a
job description and job advertisement, which likewise often uncritically reinforce majority viewpoints about what is needed for success in a position. Natarj et al. discuss the impact of these documents in library hiring: “Bureaucratic screening processes around hiring (e.g., requiring certain degrees and qualifications or years of experience) allow libraries to maneuver around diversity requirements.”18

Committee Composition

For both the hiring and librarian review committees that are following the prescribed evaluative criteria, how the committee is constituted, trained, and led affects the interpretation of those criteria as well as the outcomes of the process. While other individual evaluative processes in libraries, and in higher education, such as performance reviews or student evaluations, are also prone to bias,19 committee-based processes present special challenges in their intra-group dynamics and leader dynamics. In particular, the members of the committee evaluating candidates affect the decision-making process, through the interaction of status and voice.20 Higher-status committee members, whether through identity,21 time served at the institution, or faculty rank,22 may have a greater voice in a process and therefore lead the group toward their desired outcome.23 Additionally, the leadership skill of the committee chair may affect the group’s ability to come to true consensus, instead of being swayed by power structures within the committee; research has shown that the identity and values of this committee chair has a significant effect on the outcome of the process.24 Thus, without explicit attention to group dynamics and leadership, hiring and librarian review committees are often strongly affected by the perspectives and biases of individual members who wield the most identity-based or positional power in the group.

Individual Interpretation

The committee’s interpretative process of applying written documents and policies to make a decision opens up a new avenue for challenges to equity. As observed by Posselt et al., “if we want to make systems of evaluation more equitable, we need to attend to both the information and criteria in use as well as how actors make sense of it.”25 The evaluation committee’s sense-making, in both hiring and review processes, is affected by the biases of participants as well as the structure of the interpretive process itself.

While the use of established evaluative criteria lends an appearance of objectivity to the process of evaluating candidates, individual interpretations of these criteria can be affected by the implicit bias of committee members; for example, the way that someone considers a candidate to have met a criterion can be influenced by their perception of those who hold the same identity, whether or not they realize this influence.26 This can be especially pernicious in those qualifications that are ambiguously defined in the documentation; the interpretation of generic or vague qualifications for hiring and advancement, such as “excellent communicator” or “collegial,” can lead to committee members drawing heavily on individual biases.27 This is often exacerbated when these processes move quickly due to other time demands on the evaluators; speed itself can result in significant challenges to equitable evaluation as it often results in overreliance on existing biases and on “proxies of merit”28 within candidate files.29 Such proxies are markers of quality that committee members use to judge candidates instead of performing their own substantive evaluation of candidates’ work. For example, in both hiring and continuing appointment or promotion decisions, an article published in a journal deemed to be ‘prestigious’ by a committee member may benefit the candidate, regardless of the article’s substance. Reliance on these proxies may put librarians from racially minoritized groups at a disadvantage; editorial boards of journals (including those within librarianship) remain largely White,31 which presents an issue in the face of evidence elsewhere in academia that White journal reviewers are regularly critical of research conducted by scholars of color.32

Whether based in reliance on flawed proxies for merit or on identity group-based stereotypes, these individual biases in interpreting candidates’ qualifications are reinforced by the mechanics of the evaluative process itself, particularly through candidate scoring and committee deliberation.33 In hiring and review processes, committees typically rate candidates based on documented criteria and deliberate about any inconsistencies of scoring. Members of the group bring their own interpretations and the in-group power dynamics affect how these interpretations sway the group decision.34
External Perspectives

Ostensibly in an effort to expand the perspectives and interpretations of a candidate’s value or accomplishments beyond those represented on the committee, both hiring and review processes rely on external perspectives outside of written documentation and committee evaluation. For hiring, these might be reference letters or a list of references for the search committee to contact, and for the continuing review or promotion process, these are the external (to the library) letters that are often required to be included in a candidate packet. Including information about candidate quality from individuals outside the evaluating body creates challenges to equity, in that institutions are unable to control for biased language or comments within the external perspective that disproportionately affect candidates of some identities more than others. Stewart and Valian reflect this concern in their examination of bias in academic evaluative processes: “Our reservations about the value of letters in the review process arise first from the fact that these letters are prepared by individuals with unknown education about the cognitive biases outlined in this volume and with unknown capacity for fair-minded assessment.” Even if a library or institution invests in bias mitigation in hiring and promotion processes, external letters and recommendations may ultimately speak to aspects of the candidate that are not germane to the candidate’s fitness for the position or promotion, and which committee members have themselves been instructed to avoid. While there has been increasing interest in the potential biases reflected in letters of recommendation and in letters of reference, as of yet, consistent strategies to evaluate these letters as part of hiring and review processes have not emerged. While hiring processes commonly use rubrics, these evaluative tools often focus on application packets, and do not extend to supplementary materials such as external letters. Therefore external letters may be less likely to be critically examined using explicit criteria, inviting bias.

SHARED APPROACHES FOR EQUITY

Although the preceding challenges to equity are complex, there are both established and emerging strategies for addressing them. The strategies discussed in the following sections are either currently applied in hiring or library review processes—but not always in both, despite the structural similarities of the processes. Considering these as shared strategies allows each process to inform the other in useful ways, and should help ensure that the way librarians are evaluated at their time of hire is consistent with what they experience as they move through ensuing review processes for continuing appointment or promotion.

Policies and Documentation

The most effective strategy to advance equity in the documentation and policies that underlie hiring and promotion processes is to review these documents frequently and holistically. Too often, when faced with an evaluative process, libraries reach for past practice, especially as a complete revision of a hiring or librarian review manual may seem insurmountable. However, research in higher education evaluation, particularly in relation to equity in hiring and promotion processes, has moved quickly in recent years and practice documents often do not match this growing understanding. Lo et al. found this challenge when examining tenure documentation for library faculty: “Many key terms within the official tenure documents have not been operationally defined; clear benchmarks for achieving satisfactory performance have not been provided, and information about how individual criteria are weighted has been cursorily presented.” Dedicating time to creating clear guidance and unambiguous qualifications for candidates and committees will help the equity and transparency of these evaluative processes. This process should include careful consideration of the assumptions behind, and implications, of requirements or markers of value. For example, in hiring criteria, are education or experience requirements such that they could only have been gained by people with specific identity-based, economic, or other privilege? And in librarian review criteria, for example, do expectations for scholarship reflect biases toward limited, specific forms or venues that are not inclusive of the diverse audiences, purposes, methods, and forms of validation of scholarly work?
Committee Composition

Recent higher education research has examined the composition of faculty hiring committees in regards to the status and identity of committee participants, and how the values expressed by participants can influence the process and selection of candidates. This complements examinations of the composition of faculty review committees, which—across academic disciplines, including librarianship—traditionally limit “membership to those at a certain rank (i.e., level equivalent to applicant’s aspired rank),” thereby reducing the diversity of committee members’ identities and experience. In critiquing faculty evaluation committees, Minor notes that this can lead to “static decision-making environments.”

A strategic approach to addressing these issues is to revise membership requirements to deliberately alter identity and power dynamics on committees. This might mean departing from the tradition of involving only senior librarians on a promotion committee, or creating a committee primarily composed of members not of the majority identity within the library (as opposed to the practice of relying on a single member to add diversity of identity to a committee). However, as creating racially diverse committees often leads to over-taxing a few individuals of color in a department, libraries should consider ways to bring in colleagues from elsewhere in the institution or from other institutions to provide this diversity of voices for evaluation.

Even when a department has made efforts to create a diverse committee, there are inevitably strong voices and power dynamics that lead to disparities in which voices are heard and ascribed authority in deliberations. The person often best positioned to recognize and interrupt these dynamics is the committee chair. Speaking of hiring committees, Hakkola and Dyer recommend that administrators “provide a clear description of the search chair role, inclusive of feasible strategies to combat implicit bias, address discrimination, and confront faculty derisiveness.” For both hiring and librarian review processes, providing a scope and related training for committee chairs that addresses bias risks and power dynamics will help institutions create more inclusive and equitable processes that are not subject to individual preferences.

Finally, one potential way to monitor equity within an evaluation is to designate a person as a process advisor or equity advocate whose primary responsibility is to identify and interrupt bias during the evaluative process, whether in documentation created or in committee discussions. This role has become more common in academic hiring processes, but is less well-known in faculty or librarian review processes, possibly because personnel committees are often standing groups rather than ad hoc groups constituted for a particular search. These individuals can bring a deeper understanding of potential equity challenges and are better prepared than most general committee members to recognize and disrupt power imbalances throughout committee deliberations.

Individual Interpretation

The people who are chosen to participate in and lead the evaluative committee have a significant effect on the process, but creating guardrails on individual interpretation of candidate materials can also help guide groups to more equitable decisions. Implicit bias training is beneficial beyond the bounds of hiring committees, and should be used for review and promotion committees as well as a way to understand how individual perspectives on candidate materials may be influenced by unconscious biases. Evaluative rubrics, commonly used in library hiring processes, can be beneficial in continuing review processes as well. Carefully crafted rubrics not only detail the way in which a candidate can meet each qualification, their development provides a context for intentional committee conversations to create consensus around ambiguous qualifications such as ‘communication ability’—and, in the process, can often surface individual assumptions, biases, and interpretations that can be constructively disrupted. Brannon and Leuzinger, in addressing rubric use in library hiring, conclude that “Consistency is the key to reducing subjectivity, and you can enhance the rubric through group discussion.” This type of intentionality and group work often requires extra time, but the very act of “slow[ing] down […] committees’ decision-making” can lead to more equitable consideration of a candidate, in part by seeking to understand how evaluative criteria may be met in diverse ways that do not rely on biased proxies of merit used as shortcuts for evaluation. Certainly, the creation of a rubric alone is not a sufficient guard against individual interpretations and biases influencing committee deliberations—but with committees that are appropriately
trained (or, even better, that incorporate an equity advocate role), there should be sufficient awareness that will allow members to “monitor [their] own and other committee members’ comments for evidence of drift from the criteria or differential application of them […].”

**External Perspectives**

Even with committees that are educated and accountable for their own biases, the way external perspectives are incorporated into committees’ deliberations should also be carefully considered. Whether or not this information is gathered through reference calls (most common in library hiring) or through external review letters (most common in continuing appointment or promotion reviews), there are strategies that can be used to help mitigate biased feedback. First, requests for feedback on candidates should be narrowly scoped and tied directly to the evaluative criteria established by the committee; asking questions related only to referees' personal judgements, such as 'Would you hire this candidate again?' or 'Do you recommend that this candidate be promoted?' should be avoided. Within the context of asking external referees to provide feedback related to the evaluative criteria, specifically request concrete examples of “what the candidate said or did that caused [the referee] to form their judgements.” Next, when reviewing the feedback provided from external referees, apply the same evaluative rubric used by the committee to assess candidates' other materials—e.g., letters of application, portfolios, or interview responses—to help ensure the committee is only considering feedback that is relevant to the stated criteria, and is interpreting the feedback in the same way. Prior to (and/or during) reviewing external feedback, committees may wish to also discuss possible subtle forms of bias to be mindful of, for example the use of phrases (what Trix and Psenka call “doubt raisers”) that are not explicitly negative but are designed to create questions about candidates' competency or accomplishments. Finally, in both librarian and hiring review processes, only introduce external perspectives as a way to confirm (or challenge) decisions made by the committee based on its own substantive review of a candidate's materials. This will make it more likely that committee members’ own judgements—ideally informed by implicit bias training, by an equity and inclusion-framed understanding of the evaluative criteria, and by collaborative discussion—are not unduly influenced by external feedback that has likely not been formed through the same rigorous approach.

**CONCLUSION AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS**

Examining the shared structures of librarian hiring and review processes—and the corresponding shared strategies for disrupting systemic bias and racism within them—should only be the first step for academic libraries toward addressing the ‘interlocking’ ways in which these processes can undercut libraries’ goals for diversity, equity, and anti-racism. To best support librarians of color—and all librarians with identities that place them outside of the hegemonic culture of many academic libraries—even more explicit integration between hiring and review processes is necessary.

Among the structural challenges discussed here, the ambiguity and implicit sociocultural values of the criteria by which candidates for hiring and promotion are evaluated presents a unique opportunity to create critical transparency and consistency. This can help ensure librarians are hired and evaluated under a common set of expectations that recognize the value of diverse identities and professional praxis. In practice, this means holistically examining and revising both the job qualifications used in hiring processes and the evaluative criteria used to guide decisions for librarians’ continuing appointment or promotion and intentionally aligning them. The goal is to create a clear throughline and path to success for librarians in which they are not hired under a set of criteria that seeks diversity but later evaluated under criteria that privilege narrower understandings of the value of forms of librarianship and practice. Along with intentionally aligning the criteria used for hiring and evaluation, libraries should also consider developing corresponding evaluative rubrics for both hiring and continuing review so that there is consistency in how the criteria are applied to individual accomplishments, and there is some structural control over potential differences in how a specific hiring committee and a later librarian personnel committee may interpret the evaluative criteria. This should be communicated to job candidates during
the hiring process so that they have both an understanding and assurance of the way they should expect to be evaluated and what it means to be successful at the library.

While the work of developing and implementing these types of holistic changes will necessarily look different depending on each library and its broader institutional context, the likely need to do this work outside of any one search committee (with a limited focus and duration) or standing personnel committee (with a similarly limited scope) creates an opportunity to ensure that the work of ensuring inclusivity is itself appropriately inclusive and participatory. In setting out to make structural changes that cut across similar, but separately ‘owned,’ processes, academic library leaders should have the freedom to establish working groups that are not constrained by existing membership requirements and that intentionally include (and center) the perspectives of library workers who may be marginalized in current structures and processes—helping ensure that it is their voices informing libraries’ new evaluative models. And, in recognizing and rewarding this work as valued, leaders can model the priorities that should be reflected in evaluative criteria and processes they are seeking to transform.

NOTES


42. Shah and Fife, “Obstacles and Barriers in Hiring.”
46. Minor, “Faculty Diversity and the Traditions of Academic Governance,” 58.
48. Minor, “Faculty Diversity and the Traditions of Academic Governance.”
55. Culpepper et al., “Do Rubrics Live up to Their Promise?,” 21.
56. Stewart and Valian, An Inclusive Academy, 236.
60. Trix and Psenka, “Exploring the Color of Glass.”
62. Damasco and Hodges, “Tenure and Promotion Experiences.”