Identifying Barriers to Application in Academic Librarian Job Postings

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INTRODUCTION

Efforts to diversify staffing in academic libraries are ongoing across institutions, but little improvement has been made in the last few decades. While the profession’s stagnant demographics remain very white, there is still a need to focus on improving the hiring process to make it a more equitable one for all. Applicant pools can be overwhelmingly white even relative to the demographics of the profession. Library directors sometimes even point to this inability to attract BIPOC applicants for librarian positions as to why they do not have diverse staff.1 Thus, this study aims to examine one aspect of the hiring process in academic libraries—job postings and their application requirements—to see what aspects might inadvertently put BIPOC applicants at a disadvantage and discourage them from applying, as well as which aspects they find to facilitate the job search process. The central question driving this research study is:

What elements in job postings and application requirements for academic librarian positions do BIPOC applicants find to be encouraging or discouraging to application?

By critically questioning established practices in academic librarianship, it is my hope that new practices can be identified to attract more diverse applicant pools and reduce the number of barriers in the application process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hiring in Academic Libraries

Because of their place within higher education, academic libraries are inherently affected by the practices and standards of academia when it comes to their hiring processes. These practices can change from institution to institution depending on the culture, with there even being differences between four-year universities and community colleges.2 Although it is possible to see some consistency between different libraries, particularly with the recruitment guidelines provided by the Association of College and Research Libraries,3 not all parts of the process are equally delineated, which makes it hard to know what is actually common practice at different institutions.

It is important to note that there are two sides to the hiring process, one being the library doing the hiring and the other being the person looking for a new position. The actual perspective of the job searcher is rather limited in the literature.4 Instead, this side of the process is often addressed in the form of advice or suggested approaches to take for a successful job search.

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typically aiming to mold the applicant to fit the search committee’s wants. As for the other side of hiring, much of the literature focuses on how to conduct the interview portion of recruitment, both the initial screening interview and the full-day academic interview. Minimizing bias is encouraged in this part of the process. This can include avoiding hiring for fit, which as Jennifer Vinopal points out, often introduces bias into the recruitment process.

These discussions about various parts of the hiring process in academic libraries have yet to give the same level of attention to job postings for these roles. Thielen and Neeser have noted the importance of creating inclusive job postings, although their work is specifically focused on data practitioner positions. It is necessary to further examine job postings and the associated required qualifications for positions across academic librarian-ship to understand what potential barriers might be in place, as well as to be able to find ways to improve the process.

**Diversity Efforts in LIS Recruitment**

Part of the focus on hiring in academic libraries has been on how to increase racial and ethnic diversity in the profession because of demographics that continue to be dominantly white. This is important both so that academic libraries can more accurately represent the patrons they serve and to bring in a wider variety of views. In SPEC Kit 356 on diversity and inclusion, a majority of the responding ARL libraries noted a focus on “recruitment strategies to increase ethnically/culturally diverse applicant pools.” However, roughly half of these libraries did not feel successful in their attempts. In more recent years, particularly after the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent revitalization of the racial justice movement, there has been a renewed sense of urgency for diversity in recruitment, but a majority of library directors still feel they are lacking the right strategies.

The attempted strategies used across academic libraries to diversify staff and create a more inclusive process are many and varied, including diversity residencies and casual mentoring. Because these have not been as successful as hoped, Lindsey Harper has recommended making changes to recruitment methods, noting that if potential applicants have not been “instructed on how to play “the game” of academia, those without such knowledge are at a greater disadvantage compared to those who know the unspoken rules.” To find new approaches, Jade Alburo et al. looked to hiring practices in professions outside of academia, such as more formal mentorship programs, to see what has been more successful in creating an inclusive process. While Gaspar and Brown argue that considering fit is important for effective hiring, many others have shifted away from considering fit while hiring in order to create a more inclusive process that can address diversity. However, job posting practices and application requirements remain overlooked as a potential avenue for creating a more inclusive process.

**Whiteness in LIS**

With a clear need to examine and assess current hiring practices and how they help or hinder racial and ethnic diversity efforts in academic libraries, one way of conducting this analysis is through the lens of critical race theory. The concept of whiteness, which Angela Galvan makes clear is about more than just skin color and encompasses hegemonic values and characteristics, is also valuable in considering how established practices in hiring can contribute to inequity. As Todd Honma notes, libraries have long centered whiteness in their practices and how they provide services. It is this whiteness that “is at the root of the profession’s inability to recruit and retain people of color.”

As a part of higher education, academic libraries are also affected by the whiteness embedded within the institution at large. Within the context of the university, Diane Lynn Gusa refers to this as “white institutional presence.” It is imperative that we examine how the white institutional presence embedded in higher education and the historical whiteness of libraries can affect hiring and recruitment practices, and more specifically, how those principles can manifest within job postings and application requirements thus putting potential BIPOC candidates at a disadvantage.
METHODOLOGY

Participant Selection

This phenomenological study involved interviewing individuals who identified as BIPOC and had been searching for an academic librarian position at the time or recently, going back to January 2022. Participants were selected using purposive sampling and were recruited via the We Here forum on Facebook, a community specifically for BIPOC in librarianship. Participants also varied in career level, ranging from recent graduates to full career librarians, as well as having differing levels of success in finding a new position, thus representing varying experiences with the job search process. Ultimately, 12 individuals were interviewed in total, following guidelines that suggest that number as sufficient to reach thematic saturation.

Data Collection

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured, allowing for probing questions and clarification as needed to understand the nuance in each individual’s experience. Interviews were conducted over the span of a month in the fall of 2022, with the length of each interview ranging between 25 minutes to an hour. All interviews were conducted and audio recorded via Zoom, with the consent of each participant acquired in advance. The question guide for the interviews consisted of six main questions, which addressed experience with the job search process broadly, as well as their perceptions of specific job posting characteristics (See Appendix). Three of these questions included planned follow-ups that were asked as needed, and most questions had additional unplanned probing questions as well. Though the focus of the research is on the experience of those who identify as BIPOC, none of the questions were framed specifically about race or ethnicity, allowing interviewees to consider their whole selves in their responses and generating intersectional responses that addressed other components of their identities as well, such as disability or gender.

Data Analysis

Initial drafts of the transcripts were generated with the auto-transcription feature built into Zoom. After completion of all interviews, transcripts were then cleaned up and prepared for analysis by the researcher. Once all of the transcripts were finalized, they were analyzed using applied thematic analysis, and thematic codes were maintained and organized in Airtable. This approach involved identifying themes across the participants’ responses and applying inductive codes to excerpted passages from the interviews to represent the various themes.

RESULTS/FINDINGS

The data analysis resulted in six higher-level themes, with more specific codes within each of those. Because the responses typically covered the totality of the job search experience, the excerpts were also coded to reflect whether or not they specifically addressed job postings or any associated application requirements. This helped narrow the focus of the results to four relevant themes: (1) job description and qualifications, (2) salary and benefits, (3) any additional job posting information, and (4) required application materials, with both positive and negative characteristics identified within each of these categories.

Job Description and Qualifications

When it came to the position description and qualifications, participants overwhelming noted that what they found most helpful were clear and detailed descriptions of the position’s responsibilities and the required qualifications. Of course, what may be considered “detailed” or “clear” can vary from person to person. A few participants even noted that it’s possible for a posting to come across as too detailed, the concern being that it could imply that the position and institution would lack flexibility. One person also noted that too much information could become overwhelming for neurodivergent individuals. However, overall, participants expressed apprecia-
tion for detailed information about the position to ensure they had an accurate understanding of the responsibilities and how the position functioned within the institution.

The layout of the information was also identified as an important and potentially helpful component. Several participants preferred when information was split into more defined sections with headings to facilitate the general understanding of the position, especially when applicants are at an earlier stage of the job search process. A few participants also pointed out that they found bulleted lists in particular helpful in identifying key information about the position. Both of these layout components were noted as facilitating the process of skimming multiple postings when deciding which ones to apply to. They also have the potential to mitigate some of the concerns expressed regarding an overwhelming amount of information.

Beyond the layout of information and the level of detail in position descriptions, several participants also noted being concerned about postings that appeared to contain either too many responsibilities or too many qualifications. While “too many” can also be subjective, some noted they deemed a position to have too many responsibilities if they were disparate enough that they seemed like more than one position combined into a single role. A position was also judged to have too many responsibilities or too many required qualifications relative to the salary, which was sometimes deemed insufficient for the level of expertise being sought or the amount of work required in the job.

Some of the interviewees also noted specific required qualifications that stood out to them, with social or interpersonal skills in particular sometimes standing out as a potential red flag for applicants. While the desire for an applicant to have these skills is not in and of itself concerning, it was often the vague language used that gave some of the participants pause, since how some potential applicants approach these skills could differ from person to person. As one participant noted, “I really look at communication closely, and I always strive to be a clear communicator, but I know that’s something I just find hard. For maybe neurodivergent folks that might mean something different.”

**Salary and Benefits**

Every single interviewee in this study brought up salary and benefits information as key at some point in their interview, often as one of the most important pieces of information in deciding whether or not to apply to a position. All of the participants mentioned that they appreciated anytime they saw this information shared, particularly the salary itself or at least a realistic salary range. While benefits information was noted less often, a few participants did point it out as being helpful to know in order to understand the full compensation package. On the other side, when this type of information is left off of job announcements, many linked this to a lack of transparency on behalf of the hiring institution. A few even stated that they no longer apply to any position that does not include salary information.

However, not all salary information is considered equal. A few participants mentioned that salary ranges that are too wide to give a potential applicant a realistic sense of what salary offer to expect are less than helpful, although still better than nothing. One individual also mentioned that simply stating the salary grade, without any actual figures, just creates more work for applicants who are already overloaded with plenty of materials to compile. While sharing the salary grade within the institution might make sense, it was not seen as helpful to those on the outside, and as one participant stated, “if you want to remove an easy barrier, that’s an easy one to do.”

**Additional Job Posting Information**

Beyond the basics of a general position description, qualifications, salary, and benefits, any additional information provided was typically deemed to be a positive sign and helpful in deciding whether to apply. Some examples of the type of additional information they appreciated seeing included the number of employees a position might supervise, any applicable schedule or expected work hours, and faculty and tenure-track status. A third of the participants also pointed out how it was helpful to read any information highlighting the library’s efforts in supporting diversity, equity and inclusion. Sometimes this information was encountered in the form
of a diversity statement, while other times it was provided as a link to the library’s diversity webpage focused on their existing efforts. Either way, they found it helpful when an institution went beyond the standard Equal Opportunity Employer statement included in most job announcements.

A few participants also mentioned generally finding it helpful when information beyond the official job announcement was shared. In one case discussed, this took the form of an additional page on the library’s website that provided additional context for the position, beyond the official posting on the institution’s career site. Another example was a YouTube video linked to from the posting that talked about the library as a whole. Finally, another participant talked about encountering an announcement for an open position that provided virtual information sessions before the application deadline in order to allow potential applicants the opportunity to ask questions and learn more about the position and library. It was noted that in this virtual session the interviewee attended, there were privacy settings in place that allowed for anonymous attendance.

Required Application Materials

As with the position description and qualifications, clarity was mentioned the most as to what was appreciated when it came to required materials to submit when applying for an academic librarian position. The bare minimum expectation was generally that a posting would share upfront what documents were expected in an application. Several participants mentioned it was a red flag if they had to go digging for that information or were surprised during the application process with additional requested materials, although it did not necessarily stop them from submitting an application.

Along with clarity, a streamlined or simplified process was also valued. Half of the participants mentioned specific types of requested materials that they generally expected to compile for an application, which included a cover letter, a CV or résumé, and three professional references. Anything beyond that was sometimes seen as redundant and a “time suck,” such as an additional online application that replicates CV information or answering supplemental questions already addressed in a cover letter. Other additional required materials that participants mentioned encountering were also often seen as adding a considerable amount of work and creating a barrier to their application. This included transcripts, which applicants did not always have at the ready, or full letters of recommendation, which some noted felt like a big ask to impose on their references at that stage of the process.

About two thirds of the interviewees also mentioned encountering job announcements that also required a diversity statement written by the applicant as part of the application materials, with some noting they have grown accustomed to expecting it. However, almost all of them spoke negatively about having to write these types of statements, particularly as individuals who identified as BIPOC. While issues of diversity and equity in the profession were certainly important to the participants, some felt that their commitment to this type of work was often already evident in their cover letter or CV. As one participant stated, “I don’t see how that helps you pick a candidate, them writing a diversity statement, because anybody can write anything to make it sound good, versus actually taking a bigger portion look at what committees they are on with professional organizations. What are they writing about if they are into scholarship? What are their goal plans?” A few others also noted that there was typically a lack of guidance on what was expected in the diversity statement, which only added to their uncertainty in how to approach the statement.

DISCUSSION

Recommendations

Considering how often this study’s participants mentioned it was helpful to have clear and detailed job postings and application instructions, assessing announcements for clarity should be an important part of the hiring process. Position descriptions and responsibilities should be divided into clear sections with headings, allowing for ease of skimming when initially encountering postings. They should also include information upfront on what materials will be required to apply for the position. To further ensure clarity, it can also be helpful to solicit feedback from various potential collaborators of the position on the accuracy of how the position is represented.
One interviewee even suggested that libraries periodically test their application and have someone run through the entirety of the process to get a sense of what the applicants experience, which has to potential to surface any pain points or redundancies that could create barriers for applicants.

Another simple, but impactful change would be to include salary information. The importance of salary information in all job announcements is certainly not new, and the participants in this study are not the first to note the inequity associated with leaving this information off. Several job posting sites have even moved to only allowing announcements that include salary information, such as the We Here Job Member Area, the NA-SIG Jobs Blog, the ARLIS/NA JobList, and the CLIR and DLF Job Board. However, the ALA Joblist, which remains one of the largest and most centralized websites for announcing job openings for academic librarian positions, continues to allow postings without salary information included. In fact, many academic institutions still do not include this information despite the inequity concerns and the growing push for transparency. It is clear from these interviews that this change could make a difference with attracting more racially diverse applicant pools.

Because academic libraries are forced to work within their institutional context, they are sometimes limited in what information they can share within the standard job announcement that is available on the university’s career website. However, as several participants mentioned encountering in their job searches, some libraries are finding ways to share information beyond what is in the official posting. One recent example comes from the University of Georgia University Libraries, which has taken to hosting an informational PDF for open positions on their website with details about the role, as well as more information about the institution and the location. This was their approach for their recent opening for a Scholarly Communications Librarian. For this particular position, they also hosted a Zoom webinar that could be attend anonymously ahead of the initial review deadline for applications, allowing interested individuals the opportunity to ask questions and gain further understanding of the position. It can also be helpful to look at non-academic examples, such as the United States Geological Survey’s hiring of data visualization specialists in 2021. In addition to hosting informational sessions for these openings, the hiring team created a page that included answers to common questions and thoroughly explained the application process. This level of radical transparency would certainly help in removing barriers for BIPOC in their job searches.

Ultimately, simplifying the process overall and reducing the number of required application materials has the potential to make the biggest impact for BIPOC applicants. Considering the totality of the job search, from application to interviews to negotiation, it can take quite a lot of time and energy, especially when you are applying to multiple positions. Add the additional day to day life responsibilities, whether they are a graduate student still finishing their MLIS or an academic librarian who already has a full-time job, and it can be hard to find the time to dedicate to the application process. As one participant put it, “it feels like another job to apply for jobs.” While search committees are also expected to engage in a lot of work to fill a position, they usually only focus on one open role, and this committee work falls within service expectations of their job instead of being added on labor. Reducing the amount of required materials and being more intentional about what is required has the potential to make the process less overwhelming for applicants and also simplify it for search committee members. For example, instead of asking for an additional diversity statement, encourage applicants to address their efforts with diversity, equity, and inclusion in their cover letter. If letters of recommendation are desired, asking for them only once a candidate has reached the final stage. In general, it is important to consider what information you actually need from candidates at the initial application stage and what is the most informative way to obtain that without creating unnecessary obstacles.

**Future Research**

There is a lot of ongoing research on issues of equity in the hiring process for academic librarians, with more and more recent studies focused on the actual perspective of BIPOC in the profession. While the focus of this study was on the job postings and application requirements, this methodology could certainly be applied to other parts of the hiring process to expand on the current literature. It could also be helpful to focus similar research on Black and Indigenous librarians specifically, who remain particularly underrepresented in the profession. Of
course, diversity goes beyond race, and while participants of this study represented a variety of other identities, it would also be helpful to conduct a similar study focused on other marginalized or underrepresented groups in academic librarianship, such as individuals with disabilities or those who identify as transgender or non-binary.

**CONCLUSION**

The entirety of the job search process for academic librarian positions is decidedly an intensive one, and the early stage of finding openings and applying to them is no exception. While this is true for anyone applying to these jobs, it can feel especially overwhelming for BIPOC in academic librarianship, which has not always been a welcoming profession. The potential barriers to application surfaced in this study might not always be unique to BIPOC, but it does give a sense of the obstacles they encounter that can deter them from applying. A job posting might only be a small portion of the overall hiring process in academic libraries, but as the first step, it sets the tone for the rest of the experience for applicants. For this reason, academic libraries need to make sure they are critically examining their postings for characteristics that favor white applicants and creating an equitable process that encourages BIPOC to apply.
APPENDIX

INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

Background
To start, the first set of questions will cover the job search process, both your recent or current experience with the process and your general feelings about it.

Q1. Briefly describe your recent experience with searching for an academic librarian position.
   • Follow-up: What did you feel was the biggest struggle or stumbling block in the process?

Q2. What are your overall feelings about the job search process for academic librarian positions?
   • [If negative experience] Follow-up: What would have helped make that experience feel different?

Job Postings and Applications
In this next set of questions, the questions are focused on job postings in particular and their associated application requirements for academic librarian positions. Job postings might also be known as job announcements and include any posting that announces an open position to be filled through hiring. Application requirements include the necessary materials or documents that must be submitted to apply for a position.

Q3. What characteristics in job postings or application requirements have you found to be helpful in the process or a positive sign?

Q4. What characteristics in job postings or application requirements have you found to be barriers to application or a concerning sign?

Q5. Take a look at this example job posting. What characteristics stand out to you as either positive or concerning, in terms of either what's included in the job posting or what is required for the application materials?
   • [If salary/benefits and application requirements not addressed in response] Is there anything that stands out to you regarding the salary and benefits section, or regarding the application requirements?

Closing
Q6. Is there anything else you would like to add about your overall job search experience that you have not had the chance to mention yet?

NOTES


27. “We Here Job Member Area,” We Here, accessed February 27, 2023, https://www.wehere.space/shop/p/submit-a-job-opportunity.


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