

Academic Librarian Search Committee Members Identify Inclusivity Concerns with On-Campus Interview Practices

Houk, K. & Neilson, J. (2023). Inclusive hiring in academic libraries: A qualitative analysis of attitudes and reflections of search committee members. *College and Research Libraries*, 84(4), 568-588. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.84.4.568>

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Article abstract

Objective – To understand how academic librarian search committee members' perceptions and attitudes affect the equitability and inclusiveness of the on-campus interview process.

Design – Thematic text analysis of open-ended responses to short-answer questions from an online survey.

Setting – Online survey conducted between February and March of 2021.

Subjects – 166 academic librarians who had served on hiring committees for academic librarians in North America between 2016 and 2020.

Methods – Participants for the 33-question survey were recruited through several academic library listservs and social media postings on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter. The researchers first individually reviewed and coded all responses for short answer survey questions, then reviewed the codes together. Finally, a thematic map was developed after the researchers reached a consensus on their shared approach to coding and generating clusters of meanings.

Main Results – Six major clusters were identified through thematic coding of participants' text responses concerning their experiences of on-campus interview practices as hiring committee members. These themes represented challenges to the inclusiveness of academic librarian searches, and included search committees' treatment of the interview process as either intentional or situational tests (1), reliance on the ambiguously defined selection criteria of fit (2), experience with varying levels of commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, antiracism, and accessibility (DEIAA) values (3), frustration with prevalence of institutional bureaucracy throughout the hiring process (4), and uneven adoptions of inclusive hiring (5) or reflective practices (6). The researchers also noted a common respondent mistake of misinterpreting equal (i.e., identical) treatment of candidates as evidence of equitable interview practices.

Conclusion – Findings from this study highlighted the importance of academic institutions and hiring committees adopting reflective practices to critically and intentionally incorporate DEIAA-informed practices in planning and conducting academic librarian searches. The authors also stressed the need to reduce possible biases in hiring practices favoring candidates who conforms to White, ableist, and heteronormative culture and values. Examples of these efforts included considering the necessity of each interview element for assessing candidate performances, proactively ensuring full accessibility of the interview itinerary, and operationalizing the definition of "fit" in assessing candidates' abilities.

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Evidence Summary

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Commentary

This study brought the little-studied perspectives of the academic librarian search committee members into focus and recommended practical ideas for improving on-campus interview designs. An assessment using the *EBL Critical Appraisal Checklist* (Glynn, 2006) and the *Critical Review Form* (Letts et al., 2007) confirmed the overall study structure is sound. The research had a clear purpose, the selection of theoretical frameworks and methodology were rational and appropriate for the research questions, and the recruitment practice was transparent. The full survey instrument has been made available, the data analysis process was rigorous, and the researchers provided positionality statements as part of their exploratory qualitative research. Limitations concerning generalizability of the findings and directions for future research were also addressed.

Yet, despite the many elements that strengthened credibility of the study, there were some detail omissions that weakened its dependability. Firstly, the epistemological process of interrogating bias should include acknowledging the researchers’ unique relationships with the study topic and population (Robinson & Wilson, 2022), but the authors’ own experiences with academic librarian searches were not addressed in their respective positionality statements. In addition, although the total respondent count was provided, it is unlikely that all 166 participants of a predominately multiple-choice survey replied to every optional open-ended question. Since this article is focused on those text responses, it would be helpful to know the response rate for those particular questions, and the number or proportion of responses contributing to each theme. Moreover, the researchers defined several criteria for their “ideal” study participants, but did not confirm whether those parameters, such as search experiences within the past five years, were applied when selecting participants. Finally, while the researchers rightfully noted the limited research concerning on-campus academic librarian interviews, the currency of the literature review also contributed to the perceived scarcity. The most recent research cited in this 2023-published article was a conference paper presented in 2018, and more current literature evaluating academic library searches with an DEIAA focus were not captured in the article (see Arch et al., 2021; Cole & Moss, 2022; Steidinger et al., 2021).

Because of these validity limitations, readers are advised to consider overall trustworthiness of the findings with some reservation. Nonetheless, this article is a timely reminder for academic librarians and administrators to critically re-examine the purpose and necessity of the on-campus interview structure through a lens of equity and inclusivity. The findings also have broader implications beyond university and college libraries as some of the equity issues raised by the researchers, including reliance of “fit” as an ambiguous evaluation criteria and treatment of every interview element as a test, are hiring practices shared across other types of academic or library settings (Cole & Moss, 2022).

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