

Orolando Duffus

# The art and science of securing a job in an academic library

## Landing your first, or next, position

**W**hile there are countless numbers of books, articles, webinars, forums, and courses that provide helpful tips, tricks, and strategies to successfully navigate the academic job search and interview process, they may only slightly improve a candidate's chance of successfully landing a job. This article, based on the author's personal job search experiences leading to a position in a research library, focuses on five factors that can make a significant difference in improving an LIS student or recent LIS graduate's odds of success in landing a job in any type of academic setting, from large research institutions to community colleges.

A study found that factors such as prior academic library experience (including practicums), professional service/committee work, and a record of publications can significantly increase or decrease the odds of getting a job after graduation.<sup>1</sup> Brian Kenney suggests that LIS candidates can significantly increase their chances of landing a job by being willing to relocate and by effectively marketing themselves.<sup>2</sup>

To be successful, a candidate needs to understand that the main purpose of the recruitment process is to assess the competency, fit and motivation of the candidate. With this in mind, the following are some fundamental things that candidates can do to dramatically increase their chances of securing a job in a research library.

### **Scholarly activities: Authorship and conference presentation**

Librarians are counted as faculty at more than half of all U.S. colleges and universities.<sup>3</sup> Those librarians are usually required to follow the same procedures that are established for appointing all institutional faculty members. In cases where librarians are considered professional staff members, they are usually encouraged or required to engage in scholarly activities. In any case, librarians are judged by professional colleagues on and off campus on the basis of their contribution to scholarship, the library profession, and library service.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Authorship*

Authorship is a primary measure that is used to evaluate librarians for employment, promotion, and tenure. Therefore, it is important to have publications on one's CV or to be in the editorial process during the job hunt. This can significantly improve a candidate's chance of securing a position. Additionally, it increases marketability, thereby opening up more opportunities that will in turn equip the candidate with leverage and bargaining power in the job market.

---

Orolando Duffus is business librarian at the University of Houston Libraries, email: oaduffus@uh.edu

© 2019 Orolando Duffus

A candidate without a record of scholarship will statistically have a more difficult time standing out in the job market, making it more difficult to get past the CV screening phase. Furthermore, candidates who advance to the interview stage must still demonstrate their interest in authorship. Candidates can expect to address questions such as: “Librarians here must satisfy requirements in professional service and scholarship to qualify for eventual promotion. How do you see yourself satisfying these requirements?” and the like.

It is important to note that the types of publications are sometimes weighted during the interview process when there are competing candidates with similar qualifications. Depending on the publisher and citation metrics, more value is typically placed on books and book chapters than articles and review articles. Additional value is also placed on the prestige and reach (global, national, or regional) of the book publisher or journal that publishes one’s work. In addressing interview questions on scholarship, candidates should focus on affirming their interest in all aspects of scholarly activities.

### *Conference presentations*

The benefits of presenting at conferences are numerous: you are able to increase your profile within the library community, share your knowledge or research findings with a wider audience, make new contacts, expand your résumé, and gain valuable public speaking skills.<sup>5</sup> Having presentation experience is a great selling point, and it helps the candidate who has not published. It is also a great opportunity for candidates to demonstrate their interest and aptitude for scholarship.

### *Presenting at the job interview*

Many libraries require candidates to deliver a 20-to-30-minute presentation during the in-person interview. This is probably the only opportunity where the entire library gets to assess the candidate’s ability to represent the institution at speaking engagements and perform teaching duties, if applicable. Therefore, it is an opportunity for candidates to shine,

captivate the audience, and demonstrate why they will be an asset to the library or department. Ultimately, the candidate should aim to cultivate shared experiences. This is a good indicator of “fit.” Ostensibly, interviews center around qualifications and experience, but the final decision often hinges on how well the search committee and others can assess whether the candidate compliments the organization or department’s culture.

### **Professional service**

Librarians at many libraries are expected to contribute to the advancement of the library profession and relevant fields at the regional, national, and international levels. For promotion purposes, librarians are required to contribute beyond mere affiliation and attendance at meetings and conferences. Candidates should be prepared to highlight and discuss any relevant experiences in detail. If they are new to the profession, they should be prepared to demonstrate their interest in future contributions through committee work; service as an association officer; service as a program planner, speaker, discussion leader, or panelist; service as a publications editor for a professional organization; etc.

While not as significant as publications, candidates can increase their chances of landing a job by talking about their participation or contribution to library and university service. For recent LIS graduates, these experiences may come from internships/practicums or servicing on library student advisory council/committee/board and student government associations. These skillsets are relevant and transferable. Therefore, interviewees should connect and relate these experiences when possible.

### **Gain relevant library experience: Maximize your LIS degree**

Experiential learning can have a significant impact on LIS students’ employability, earnings, and overall job readiness.<sup>6</sup> There are a wealth of studies that emphasize the benefits of experiential learning as it relates to bridging

the experience gap often neglected by MLS programs. Therefore, LIS students and early career librarians should acquire as much experience as possible in areas that match their career path. While some experience and skillsets are transferable, it may not be in one's interest to work extensively in circulation at a public library if one wants to ultimately be a liaison or subject specialist. Max Eckard found that candidates who had been employed in academic libraries were five times more likely to get a job compared to those who had not.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, candidates who had participated in an internship or practicum were three times more likely to be successful on the job hunt.

This suggests that the preparation process should ideally begin many months in advance of the targeted hiring/employment date. Candidates should conduct a thorough and nationwide review of job postings for their desired job, then work to fulfill as many of those requirements as possible prior to entering the job market. A candidate's ability to connect in a practical way to the job requirements is beneficial when answering situational questions, and in providing solid examples during the interview process.

### **Willingness to relocate: Like riding a bicycle, you must keep moving to keep your balance**

In the current and foreseeable job market, chances are the perfect job opportunity will appear in another state or halfway across the country. Therefore, it is within the candidate's best interest to first set up some geographic criteria and proceed from there. For me, it was important to live where the year-around temperature was above 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and in a city with a minimum population of 100,000, among other considerations. Your parameter may include variables such as proximity to family, friends, beaches, mountains, etc.

Many libraries encourage out-of-area applicants to apply by offering reasonable moving and relocation expense reimburse-

ment benefits. Some institutions will handle all the logistics involved, while others will allow you to make your own arrangements and seek reimbursement afterwards. Be sure to verify and take this into consideration during the salary/benefits negotiation phase.

### **Pitch: It's about telling a true story well**

Now that you have positioned yourself to be successful on the job hunt, the final step is to give the best account of yourself. The quality of your pitch will highly depend on what you know about the organization and how well your skills and expertise match with the job duties. Therefore, it is critical that you are thorough in your research of the library, its parent institution, and the department where your position lives. Candidates should commit a significant amount of time reviewing the libraries' social media platforms and websites to look for any clues that may guide their approach. Make it your duty to understand their strategic directions and identify some initiatives where you can make unique contributions.

Understanding and thoroughly completing each job application requires a significant time commitment if you do it well. The best way to avoid job hunting burnout and making sure to use your time wisely is to be more selective in your job hunt. It is very tempting to whip out a generic cover letter and CV for any job that looks promising, but, psychologically, you will pay for it in the long run.

It is important to understand that in most cases, search committees are ad hoc and consist of library employees with varying job duties, skill levels, expertise, and experiences. These committee members tend to be very thorough and take this responsibility very seriously. As a result, they have low tolerance for poorly written CV's that do not speak directly to the job description. Therefore, it is crucial that candidates commit the time to research the job requirements and tailor their cover letters and CV's specifically to each job. I have served on search com-

mittees where the most qualified person on paper didn't make it past the phone interview because they didn't tell their story well.

Another important part of the pitch happens during the in-person interview. At this point it's all about you telling your story and telling it well. Prior to the phone and/or in-person interview, have a friend or professional colleague help you prep for the interview by asking you potential interview questions.

If you are required to do a presentation, make sure it is within the time allotted—if you are told it must be ten minutes, then time it exactly (and proofread your slides). Please remember, even if you are well prepared, but don't get the job, it's not that you failed, it's most likely that the other candidate was more experienced and qualified—these are elements outside of your control. It is no secret that libraries across the country are facing tough economic times, so if they brought you halfway across the country to speak with you then they must have liked what you submitted on your application, and you aced the phone interview.

## Conclusion

Preparing for the job hunt is like preparing to run your first marathon. To be your best self on the day of your interview requires months of preparation. Race day tips are helpful but can be useless if one has not laid the groundwork leading up to the event. A great talker might be able to be glib during a phone interview, but a day-long interview (or two days in some case) almost always reveals whether one is truly prepared or not.

The most valuable asset an MLIS candidate or early career librarian can have is mentors. Mentors can be a tremendous help in a candidate's job readiness by creating professional development opportunities. Mentors often invite mentees to serve on local and regional library conference planning committees, observe or take notes for high-level administrative meetings, collaborate on publications and speaking engagements, and

coteach information literacy classes, among other things.

Potential job seekers should identify and capitalize on professional development opportunities such as student/early-career librarian travel scholarships, consider residencies and fellowships, and attend free webinars on topics that align with their career path.

The candidates that practice the elements discussed in this article will significantly increase their odds of securing a job.

## Notes

1. Max Eckard, Ashley Rosener, and Lindy Scripps-Hoekstra, "Factors That Increase the Probability of a Successful Academic Library Job Search," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 2 (March 1, 2014): 107–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.02.001>.
2. Brian Kenney, "How to Land a Library Job," *Publisher's Weekly* 260, no. 31, (February 8, 2017): 22–23, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/libraries/article/58574-how-to-land-library-job.html>.
3. William H. Walters, "Faculty Status of Librarians at U.S. Research Universities," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 42, no. 2 (March 1, 2016): 161–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2015.11.002>.
4. "A Guideline for the Appointment, Promotion and Tenure of Academic Librarians," ACRL (September 6, 2006), <http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/promotiontenure>.
5. Tanya Lisa Rogoschewsky, "Developing a Conference Presentation: A Primer for New Library Professionals," *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research* 6, no. 2 (December 1, 2011), <https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/perj/article/view/1573>.
6. Orolando Duffus, "Assessing UNC-Greensboro's Reference Interns Program: Enhancing the Employability of LIS Students," *College & Research Libraries News* 78, no. 5 (May 2017): 259–62.
7. Eckard, Rosener, and Scripps-Hoekstra, "Factors That Increase the Probability of a Successful Academic Library Job Search." ❧