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Design of the Library Director
Interview: The Candidate's Perspective

To provide information on current practices in designing and conducting the interview for the library director position, fifty-four directors who recently and successfully had gone through the job search process gave data on the composition of search committees, individuals and groups with whom they met, length and format of the interview, and background documents they received. Suggestions for improvement in the overall search and interview process are made.

THE CURRENT DECADE-LONG JOB CRUNCH affecting librarians has spawned numerous articles offering advice to potential job candidates and to hiring institutions on how best to conduct their respective parts of the job search process.

Christofferson summarized the hiring process for librarians at the University of Georgia and reported that it takes at least six months per position, involves twenty-six different steps, and costs a minimum of $1,750.[1]

In her study of criteria used by 181 large academic and public libraries to select new staff members, Estabrook reported the most important part of the job search process is the personal interview, a finding with which Peele agreed.[2,3]

Based on his survey of job candidates and library employers, Clarke reassuringly observed: "There is growing evidence that the interview process is being steadily refined and a real effort is being made to treat candidates with the respect and individual attention they deserve."[4]

The purpose of this article is to examine how well colleges and universities looking for new library directors have followed advice available to them in the literature.

Specifically, have these institutions designed and executed the most important part of the time-consuming and expensive job search process—the personal interview—in accordance with recommended practice? Is Clarke justified in making his cheery observation, or are colleges and universities cheating candidates as well as themselves by conducting inadequate interviews for the most important position in an academic library?

This article is concerned mainly with the library director interview from the perspective of its design and structure. The literature is replete with papers on what types of questions to ask candidates, how to phrase questions to elicit complete responses, and how to comply with equal employment opportunity and affirmative action guidelines once the interview is under way.[5]

In choosing a source of information on how library director interviews are designed and conducted, the writer eschewed the strategy of requesting from hiring administrators or search committee heads statements of official guidelines and procedures. Instead, the writer solicited information from the announced successful candidates for a number of library director positions. This manner of information gathering allowed a unique perspective on the realities of interviewing for the director position and permitted those people upon whom interviews were focused to evaluate

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the interview process and to make suggestions for improvement.

Several items in the literature are worth special note because of their excellent treatment of interview design and structure (among other parts of the total job search process). All approach the personal interview and the job search process from the perspective of the hiring institution.

Sommerfeld and Nagely, two experienced higher education administrators, combined some very concrete and specific, step-by-step advice on organizing a search committee and on conducting the search for faculty and administrators with some general thoughts on the rise and importance of search committees in higher education. The authors treated such topics as the proper size of a search committee, the specification of the committee's role and responsibility, guidelines for advertising the position, length of time for the on-campus personal interview, who should interview the candidates, and so on.[6]

In an article summarizing search-and-screen committee policies and practices in a number of American university libraries, Harvey and Parr treated many of the same points covered in the above article. Toward the end of their paper the authors enumerated several strengths and weaknesses of university library search-and-screen committees and concluded such committees are here to stay.[7]

In one of the few articles dealing with the search process for hiring an academic library director, Louise Galloway outlined the procedure followed in 1970 by librarians at the University of Louisville Libraries.[8]

Daniels, too, dealt with hiring a library director but proceeded on an entirely different tack from that of the above writers. Reflecting on the botched job of hiring a director at the mythical Erewhon State University, Daniels made seven cogent and provocative suggestions for improving the process the next time around:

1. Library support staff should be represented on the search committee.

2. Librarians and support staff should comprise a majority of the search committee.

3. The role of the search committee should be well defined.

4. The search committee should undergo training before beginning its work.

5. As many candidates as possible should be interviewed.

6. Applicants should be given a chance to investigate the library and the university.

7. Candidates' current places of employment should be investigated.[9]

These four papers, as well as several others cited below, provide an excellent backdrop against which to examine current interview practice.

METHOD

The author sent a twenty-nine-item questionnaire to those sixty-three library directors at accredited four-year colleges and universities whose new positions were announced in library journals between June 1977 and February 1979. Directors of law and medical libraries and of U.S. service academy libraries were excluded, as were branch campus library directors (unless the branches were fully developed institutions in their own right). Fifty-four directors returned usable questionnaries.

SEARCH COMMITTEES

Most articles written about procedures for hiring faculty and administrators in higher education either recommend use of search-and-screen committees or take it for granted that institutions use such committees as a normal practice.[10] The Association of College and Research Libraries endorses the use of search committees to fill all professional library positions because their use "solicits a breadth and range of opinion . . . facilitates objective consideration of the candidates' qualifications . . . promotes a sense of participation in the selection process" and also because committees afford candidates a "clearer and more balanced view of the institution."[11]

The use of search committees for hiring library directors is almost universal among the libraries represented in this study. Only four directors (all at small private colleges) report that no committee organized and conducted the search process. In each case the chief academic officer conducted the search. These four directors also report their campus visits generally were less than very well planned and that they received less than very accurate pictures of the library and the

institution during their campus visits.

Two writers less than sanguine on the use of search committees are R. Dean Galloway and Dale Shaffer, the former claiming such committees usually set unrealistically high criteria that attract the "pompous and the desperate," the latter castigating committees for their lack of representation from the library staff and for their collective lack of knowledge of librarianship.[12,13]

Several of the directors in this study find fault with the committees that helped hire them and recommend that committees be better informed on equal employment opportunity and affirmative action guidelines; that members have an interest in serving and that they acquaint themselves with the qualifications needed in a library director; that there be a better selection of people on the committee; and that they have a better understanding of their role in the search, screen, and recommendation process.

One respondent notes: "In many cases the administration and the search committee are working at cross purposes. It is imperative that the hiring officer be absolutely candid with the committee in relation to the type of person being sought."

Membership

On the number of members to be appointed to the search committee, Sommerfeld and Nagely observed, "Too few and the committee is not likely to be representative; too many and committee action may be encumbered."[14] Louise Galloway reported nine persons served on the selection committee at the University of Louisville Libraries.[15] In this study the typical search committee has six to ten members, while seven committees have fewer members and six have more.

The question of who should serve on the selection committee obviously is a critical one. The "ACRL Guidelines" and the Sommerfeld/Nagely article make relevant observations regarding the goal in forming the committee: "To create a body representative of the constituencies affected by the position" and "To appoint those who have a real need to be heard because of their particular responsibilities or working relationships with the prospective appointee."[16,17]

Shaffer complained that too often there are no librarians on search committees used to hire directors, while Galloway reported the members of the committee at the University of Louisville Libraries were all librarians.[18,19] (In a personal communication Galloway reported she would now prefer institution-wide representation on the committee, although she still would have librarians predominate.) Daniels recommended library support staff be represented on the committee (the present study does not address this point directly) and that librarians and support staff compose a majority ("Faculty, students, and administrators cannot hope to be as knowledgeable about the operation of the library—either actual or potential—as those who operate it").[20]

We have here a three-sided tension involving the desire to make the committee representative of the various constituencies to be served by the appointee, to include an adequate level of representation from the librarians, and to form a committee of workable size (recall that most committees in this study have six to ten members). Clearly, not all interests can be satisfied with the final composition of the committee, and in this study the librarians come up on the short end of things.

Sixteen directors report there were fewer than two library employees on their committees, and only four directors report more than half of the committee members were library employees. No one reports a committee with only library employees on it, and only seven directors report a library employee was the chairperson of the committee. In twenty-one cases the chairperson was a teaching faculty member, in eight the chief academic officer, and in fourteen cases some other academic administrator. (Four respondents report there was no search committee and hence no chairperson.)

There are only four reported cases of the faculty library committee serving as the search committee, although several directors report the search committee contained some or all members of the faculty library committee. In one way or another the interview process usually involves members of this standing faculty committee: forty directors report having met with the faculty library committee during the course of their visits.

Judging the Applications

Once the committee receives all applications up to the submittal deadline and eliminates those applicants who do not meet the minimum qualifications, its next major task is to whittle down the applicant list to a more manageable size. Three possible ways of gathering information for this "second cut" are by contacting applicant references, conducting preliminary interviews at professional conferences, and conducting on-site inspections at the applicants' current places of employment.

Although Daniels favored on-site inspections of candidates' current places of employment, he cautioned those hiring institutions that plan to conduct on-site visits: the initial advertisement should state that such visits will be conducted, and the search committee should be careful not to collect inappropriate information.[21]

Whether it is the issues to which Daniels referred or such things as logistical problems, expense, time constraints, or maintenance of confidentiality, the search committees or officers responsible for hiring the fifty-four directors in this study did not use on-site visits very often: only four directors report their use. Only two directors report they attended preliminary interviews at professional conferences.

In the University of Louisville Libraries search process described by Louise Galloway the committee conducted neither preliminary interviews nor on-site inspections but relied instead on letters of reference requested by mail.[22] Genaway's survey of search committee chairpersons and library and personnel directors revealed letters of recommendation are one of the most important factors, after vita and experience, in obtaining an interview.[23]

In this study, too, search committees relied on this more traditional means of gathering information for the "second cut" at the applicant pool. The committees contacted references by mail or phone and in a few cases in person. One-third of the directors requested that their placement files containing letters of recommendation be sent to the hiring institutions. (Now that job applicants have greater access to their placement files—and in some cases to letters of recommendation from one employer to another—the value of such files to prospective employers may be diminishing. Self-confident applicants may consider waiving their rights of access to their placement files.)

Although the Sommerfeld-Nagely article and the ACRL policy statement on screening and appointment of academic librarians both recommended the candidate receive a copy of the interview schedule in advance of the interview visit, only twenty-one directors in this study report they received such a schedule before their arrival on campus.[24, 25]

INDIVIDUALS AND GROUPS WITH WHOM CANDIDATES MET

Harvey and Parr recommended all candidates being interviewed for professional positions meet with "as large a number and as great a variety of campus persons as possible for mutually beneficial exposure."[26] In the University of Louisville case, Louise Galloway reported library director candidates met with the president, the academic vice-president, the selection committee, the senate library committee, faculty members, and the entire library staff.[27]

Almost all directors in this study report meeting with the president, the chief academic officer, and the professional library staff. One of the two directors who did not meet the professional staff is an internal appointment; the other individual, located in a small private college, reports having met with no library employee other than his predecessor, about whose level of cooperation this respondent notes: "As much as possible needs to be done to secure the outgoing director's cooperation in discussing transition." This individual reports the chief academic officer, not a search committee, organized the search process.

The next groups of people most frequently met by candidates are the non-professional library staff and the faculty library committee. (Forty-three and forty directors, respectively, report meeting these groups.) Galloway reported candidates interviewed at Louisville met the non-professional staff at an informal tea and that two staff persons were granted permission

to question candidates at a meeting with library faculty.[28] Daniels went much further and suggested nonprofessional staff members be represented on the search committee.[29]

Thirty-three directors report meeting the academic deans of the institutions, while thirty-two report meeting the previous library director. (The most likely explanation for why some directors did not meet their predecessors is that these librarians may already have left the campus. Since respondents were not asked why they did not meet any group or individual, however, nothing definitive can be said on this point.)

Although students usually can be counted on to give candidates their own special and valuable perspective on the library and the institution, only twenty-nine respondents report meeting students during their visits. Twelve report they would like to have met students.

In all but the most rigidly compartmentalized colleges and universities one would expect the library director to have regular work-related contacts with such important institutional administrators as the chief financial, development, and student affairs officers. Consequently, one also would expect candidates for the library directorship to be given the opportunity to confer with these individuals. In twenty-six cases, however, directors report they met with none of these three individuals.

In his interesting analysis of the kinds of activities to which academic library directors devote their time, Metz found a difference based upon size of library; i.e., directors of small libraries devote more time to the day-to-day internal operations in the library, whereas their counterparts at large libraries spend more time in such external, environmental activities as fund raising, professional activities, and representing the library to its public.[30]

No such size-dependent difference is evident in this study, however; among the twenty-six cases in which candidates did not meet with these three important institutional administrators representing part of the library's environment, the proportion of small- to large-library directors is roughly the same.

Twenty-two of the fifty-four respondents

report meeting with the chief financial officer, while twelve indicate they would like to have met with this individual. Thirteen report having met the chief development officer, and ten would like to have met that officer. Only eleven met the chief student affairs officer. Twenty-one respondents report conferring with the assistant or associate chief academic officer, seventeen with media center personnel, and fewer than ten with the computer center director and the institutional research director. That three candidates met with trustees or regents is interesting, because usually it is not considered in the purview of trustees or regents to interview candidates for such positions as library director.

Most of the responding directors report meeting with six to ten individuals and groups; six report as few as four or five; and another six report as many as eleven to sixteen. Those directors who met with the fewest groups and individuals generally feel their campus visits were less than very well planned and that they received less than very accurate pictures of the library and institution during their visits. Those directors who met with the largest number of groups and individuals record just the opposite impressions.

Of all the suggestions for improvement made by respondents, the largest number involves broader participation of institution-wide representatives in the interview process. Candidates would like to meet with more students, faculty, and administrators. A few directors express a desire to have librarians excluded from their meetings with students and nonprofessionals so that these people might not feel constrained in providing information about the library and the institution. One director suggests the candidate meet with the local AAUP chapter president and another that he or she be allowed to arrange meetings with individuals of the candidate's own choosing.

A little off the point but interesting is one director's suggestion that the candidate's spouse accompany the applicant on the interview.

Responding directors express concern not only about the number and kinds of individuals and groups with whom they met but

also about some interviewers' knowledge of librarianship.

In response to questionnaire items asking them to evaluate the knowledge levels of teaching faculty members, the president, the chief academic officer, and the assistant or associate chief academic officer (if these people interviewed the candidate), fourteen directors report three of these four individuals or groups displayed less than adequate knowledge of academic librarianship in the questions they asked.

More specifically, only seventeen directors report faculty members displayed adequate knowledge of librarianship; twenty-one report presidents displayed adequate knowledge; thirty-three report chief academic officers and ten report assistant or associate chief academic officers displayed adequate knowledge. Shaffer's indictment of search committees on the grounds of their ignorance of academic librarianship seems relevant to these interviewers as well.[31]

INTERVIEW FORMAT

The interview format that consists of nothing more than institutional representatives questioning the candidate may fail to provide the candidate with the opportunity to express some vital element in his or her approach to the position and/or to academic librarianship in general. Sommerfeld and Nagely suggested asking the candidate to make a formal presentation during the visit (as long as the request is communicated in advance).[32] Only sixteen responding directors report being asked to make such formal presentations; these directors tend more often to be in medium-size or large libraries than in small ones.

One director who was not asked to make a presentation suggests candidates be given time to "express views, goals, aspirations, interests, and possible direction for the library as the candidate sees them."

LENGTH OF CAMPUS VISIT

To "provide the candidate with adequate time to perceive the institution as a whole and the functional area in question in some detail," the typical recommended length of stay for the campus visit is two days.[33] More radically (and less practicably),

Daniels suggested each candidate be offered the opportunity to reside at the institution for a week or two so that better mutual evaluations can be made.[34] Louise Galloway described a visit lasting two days, and the subsequent first choice of the committee was invited back for a second two-day visit.[35]

Eighteen of the directors in this study reported being invited back for a second visit, while sixteen report they spent a total of two days at the campus. Twenty-one directors report visits of less than two days and fourteen report longer visits. Typically, those reporting the shortest visits interviewed at small libraries, while those reporting the longest visits interviewed at medium-size and large libraries.

Those directors who spent only one day on campus report their visits were not very well planned and that they did not come away from their visits with very accurate pictures of the library and the institution. Contrariwise, those directors who spent more than two days in total on campus were much more positive in their evaluations. Several directors say more time should be available for the candidates to acquaint themselves with the campus and less time should be spent by the institution in arriving at a decision on the successful candidate.

It is apparent that as short a campus visit as one day is insufficient, even in small colleges, for the candidate to get to know the library and the institution. Two days is a reasonable minimum with more time being necessary in larger, more complex universities.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS AND INFORMATION RECEIVED BY CANDIDATES

Properly considered, the personal interview is a two-way encounter in which the candidate evaluates the institution and its representatives just as much as they evaluate the candidate.

Before ever applying for a position and definitely before arriving on campus for the interview, the prospective candidate should use the various published sources available to conduct a personal investigation of the institution. A great deal can be learned

about trends in institutional enrollment, curriculum, staff stability in the library and the institution, collection development, library finances, and so forth by consulting successive editions of a few standard directories.

The institution, of course, has an obligation to provide the candidate with a "full and honest picture of the local situation" by giving the interviewees pertinent background documents.[36] Louise Galloway reported providing such things as "a brief statement about the structure and characteristics of the university, the cultural aspects of the city, and the organization and the extent of the university library system," as well as various annual reports of the library and the constitution and bylaws of the library faculty.[37]

One item on the questionnaire used to gather data for this study requests directors to check which of nine items of background material they received. (Responses from the seven internal appointments are not considered.) Three-fourths of the directors report receiving one or more catalogs of the institution, the library's present or immediate past budget, and one or more annual reports of the library (all judged to be very useful in assessing the position and the institution). About half report receiving a detailed job description (very useful), a list of library staff members, information about the local community, a faculty or student library handbook, and the personnel policies of the institution (the latter four judged somewhat useful). One-fourth report receiving the constitution and bylaws of the library faculty. (Most likely only this many libraries had such documents.)

Those directors who received the fewest documents are rather negative concerning the accuracy of the picture of the library and the institution they received during their interviews.

Nine directors report receiving fourteen other items of background information such as a library organization chart, committee reports on current library problems, information on cooperatives of which the library is a member, a long-range campus plan report, an organization chart of the institution, curricula vitae of library staff members, fund-raising campaign literature (all judged

very useful), a "somewhat sketchy job description" (somewhat useful), and a history of the college (not useful).

Several respondents express a desire for documents and information that get below the surface descriptions of things and reveal the problems, constraints, and frustrations existing in the library and the institution.

Twenty-two respondents list a total of forty-four documents or types of information they would like to have received, including financial and budget information about the library and the institution, the institution's endowment, current problems and future plans of the library, the status of academic planning in the institution, the caliber of the student population, one or more annual reports of the library, documents concerning personnel matters in the library, information about the local community, the library handbook, an accreditation self-study report on the institution, and minutes of library committee meetings.

Some suggestions and comments made by individual directors are: "Information on internal library politics—especially the personnel situation which was considerably deteriorated"; "information about the institution's role and scope within the state university system and its implications on independent management decisions"; an "accurate view of administration toward role of library and degree of support expected—not lip service—from academic deans"; "a good and thorough briefing by someone well-acquainted with library field, status in institution, and institutional situation"; "a frank evaluation (orally of course) of each person currently reporting to the director"; and "The administration should be more straightforward and 'tell it like it is.' Perhaps they have insufficient direct contact with the library to know how it is. Administrations should refrain from glorifying the institutions and from attempting to "intoxicate' candidates."

One director sums up the feelings expressed by several respondents: "I think it is important for the institution to realize that it is not only looking for the best candidate, it is also looking for an employee who will be happy working there. By trying to hide problems or by sweeping less than desirable conditions under the rug, it will

find that it will have a higher than average turn over and poor morale in the library."

Whether documents are the proper vehicle for conveying such information as is suggested in the above statements is a local decision. In some cases oral reports by an informed person or group may be appropriate. In any case, it would behoove the search committee to get this information to the candidate in the most appropriate form.

CANDIDATE EVALUATIONS

Respondents' overall evaluations of their experiences suggest colleges and universities must improve the design and execution of interviews for the library director position. Of the fifty-one directors who responded to three evaluative items on the questionnaire, twenty-two report their campus visits were less than very well planned; another twenty-two report they received only a somewhat accurate picture of the library during their visits; and twenty-nine report receiving only a somewhat accurate picture of the institution. About half of the directors respond with less than the highest evaluation for two of these three items.

CONCLUSION

How does Clarke's observation about the improving quality of the library interview process stand now? For this writer the claim needs tempering. Consistently one-third to one-half of the responses made to the several evaluative items on the questionnaire are negative, or at least they indicate a need for improvement. In their solicited suggestions for improvement of the interview process as well as their unsolicited comments, many of these fifty-four librarians echo the concerns of Harvey and Parr: "Alerting candidates to special campus pressure groups, physical plant problems, and the concerns of those to be supervised, as well as long-range library plans, will provide needed orientation information. Regrettably, the contrast between the mannered politeness of the screening routine and the blunt political reality of the position has caused many directors anguish."[38]

In comparing library and institutional conditions as they were presented during the interview with the realities as observed after some time on the job, several of these directors decry the lack of candor evidenced by institutional representatives during the interview.

Wesley's thoughts on the possible reasons for this lack of candor seem cynical, disingenuous, and ultimately counterproductive: "The administrator may deliberately withhold information in order to lure what he considers to be a good person into accepting a position. . . . The administrator may not consider some information important. . . . The administrator may not be able to give hiring his full attention. . . . The administrator may want to . . . [give] the candidate only the information the administrator feels he needs."[39] (Wesley writes from the perspective of a library director hiring professional staff members.)

As administrators who serve institution-wide constituencies and who are affected in their work and planning by events happening throughout their institutions, academic library directors have broad concerns that transcend library boundaries narrowly considered. The inadequacies in the design and execution of interviews noted in this article, however, may be indicative of limited perceptions on the part of search committees or chief academic officers of the scope of the library director's position.

A few years ago *College Management*, a journal for higher education administrators and especially for finance officers, published an article by Daniel Gore, who at the time was director of the library at Macalester College. Gore discussed his solution to the problem of decreasing availability of wanted books despite the growth of library collections, a matter of vital concern to higher education administrators as well as to librarians.[40] Perhaps we in the profession need to do more of such communicating with our colleagues in their own journals so that their perceptions of libraries and librarians may come to be more in line with reality. More immediately, however, there are several areas in the interview and overall search process that are in need of improvement:

1. More should be done to investigate candidates' current places of employment. Just as the student's high school grade point average is one of the most reliable predictors of academic success in college, so too is one's performance in his or her current po-

sition a good indicator of future performance.

2. Campus visits should last a minimum of two days with more time available in large, complex institutions.

3. The interviewers should have a better understanding of academic librarianship.

4. The candidate should be provided with more and better documents and information about the library and the institution. Financial and budgeting information, the status of academic planning, institutional self-evaluation and accreditation studies, library-faculty and library-administration relationships—all affect the library director in his or her work. Documents or information reflecting these areas should be made available to the candidate. (In a recent paper investigating the process for hiring an academic dean, Lutz reported similar findings and made similar recommendations.)[41]

5. There should be a greater number and variety of institutional representatives with whom the candidate interviews. Candidates should meet with students and faculty and with representatives from the finance, development, and student affairs offices as well as major academic administrators.

6. More library employees should be members of the search committee.

Search committees and hiring administrators still have a long way to go in improving the interview and search processes so as to do a better job in identifying the best candidate for the position and in candidly presenting the institution to the candidates. Just as the hastily arranged marriage based upon inadequate knowledge of one's beloved may turn quickly to disillusionment and divorce, so too may the less-than-optimal union between librarian and institution lead to an ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *College & Research Libraries News*.

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