

Kristina Clement, Chelsea Dickson, and Karen Doster-Greenleaf

Inclusive Hiring Should Be Standard in My Library

So Why Isn't It and What Can We Do About It?

Inclusive hiring practices should be standard in academic libraries. Some libraries do it incredibly well, and others—not so much. Currently, Kennesaw State University (KSU) Library System falls closer to the “not so much” category. Some years ago, the KSU Library System had system-wide guidance, support, and documentation for search procedures, but in recent years, hiring practices became siloed into departments and units. Of late, there was very little cross-departmental or cross-unit discussion about how each search chair ran their committees, which led to vastly different candidate experiences throughout the search process. To reunite and standardize our search practices, we developed the KSU Libraries Recruitment and Retention Task Force. The purpose of this task force is to develop a candidate-focused approach to talent recruitment and establish employee-focused, consistent onboarding practices through efforts that demonstrate empathy throughout the application, hiring, and orientation processes.

As we investigated the literature to inform the creation of the task force, we realized we are not alone in our missteps, nor are we alone in trying to rectify the situation.¹ A prominent issue is the subjective nature of seeking the “best fit.” While this should pertain to a candidate’s competence and suitability for the role, it often hinges on subjective feelings of the hiring entities. This subjectivity is exacerbated by the recognition that hiring extends beyond task completion to incorporating a new presence into our library’s ecosystem. The term “fit” is contentious. It’s ambiguous yet integral, posing questions about its definition, quantification, and relevance in hiring. Kathryn Houk and Jordan Nielsen’s 2023 survey underscored this ambiguity, revealing a widespread lack of clarity about the qualities sought and their evaluation metrics.² Sojourna Cunningham, Samantha Guss, and Jennifer Stout took it a step further with their research on library directors who were asked about recruiting for diversity, specifically asking the directors to address the concept of fit. Highlighting the use of terms such as “collegial,” “confident,” and “friendly” or phrases like “hitting it off” to define fit, these findings showed that “fit” in hiring is often “undefinable, intangible, and thus allows for libraries to stay within their comfort zones and replicate the status quo.”³ This ambiguity can perpetuate comfort zones and the status quo, undermining diversity and inclusivity in hiring processes.

This article will share the perspectives from three KSU librarians who had recent experiences with search committees that led to the formation of the task force.

Kristina Clement is outreach librarian at Kennesaw State University, email: kcleme19@kennesaw.edu. Chelsea Dickson is scholarly communications librarian at Kennesaw State University, email: cdickso5@kennesaw.edu. Karen Doster-Greenleaf is director of research and instructional services at Kennesaw State University, email: kdosterg@kennesaw.edu.

Kristina Clement, Outreach Librarian

In the fall of 2022, I co-chaired a faculty search with my colleague, Chelsee Dickson. Though not my first time chairing a faculty search or serving on search committees, this was my first experience with a search committee for the KSU Library System. As we prepared for the search, we received some guidance and previous documentation from the unit director overseeing the position for which we were hiring, but unfortunately, our library administration provided us with little else. With outdated files on our intranet and unclear procedures, we found ourselves navigating the process independently, uncertain about our library's best practices and guidelines for conducting the search.

As a firm believer in inclusive searches that prioritize kindness and equity toward candidates, the lack of clear direction made things challenging. I wanted to create an empathetic and supportive environment for the candidates, understanding the anxiety that accompanies the job search process. However, I felt unsure about whether certain actions were allowed or if I needed permission to implement them. The constant uncertainty weighed heavily on me, as I wanted to ensure a fair and inclusive search while avoiding potential repercussions for breaking established norms.

Together, Chelsee and I decided to forge ahead and implement the practices we believed would provide a positive candidate experience, adhering to the adage “ask for forgiveness, not permission.” We collaborated with our search committee to establish a set of guiding principles based on kindness and inclusivity. These principles included:

- Maintaining regular communication with candidates at appropriate intervals
- Providing five out of the six interview questions to candidates before the first- and second-round interviews⁴
- Not requiring cameras for the first interview and sharing the questions virtually using a PowerPoint slide deck for the candidates to read
- Putting together a detailed presentation scenario for finalists that guided them through the requirements for the presentation
- Including a list of what we expected from them during their presentation (e.g., to provide graphic design samples since the position was responsible for some graphic design) and what we did not expect from them (e.g., to have their entire presentation memorized)
- Creating a comprehensive daily schedule for finalists, outlining the purpose and topics of discussion for each meeting

Although we wished to incorporate more initiatives, these were the practices that we felt comfortable implementing without explicit permission. In truth, these actions were not revolutionary, nor were they uncommon in modern hiring practices.

By prioritizing kindness, empathy, and equity, we aimed to exemplify the values that represent the best of our institution and provide a positive candidate experience throughout the search process. We hope that these efforts will continue to create a more inclusive and supportive standard for search committees in the KSU Library System through the Recruitment and Retention Task Force.

Chelsee Dickson, Scholarly Communications Librarian

As a newly minted college graduate embarking on the journey through library school in 2012, I applied for a position in a public library with trepidation—was I meant to personally

visit the branch manager, smile, and mildly beg to be hired? Were thank-you letters appropriate or too “old school”? What was expected of me as a candidate with no experience? After ruminating on these mysteries, I took it upon myself to walk into the public library, shakily hand my résumé to the branch manager, and promptly flee—I was hired a month later. Throughout the years, I’ve reflected on how daunting the search and interview process can be for any candidate. The underlying question of “What is expected of me in the search process?” is one that I still contemplate. Luckily, I’ve since gained confidence through my work as a public library employee, a technical college librarian, and a university librarian with faculty status, meaning I’ve survived a plethora of interviews.

We now live in a new era of hiring, one that is beginning to embrace the kindness, consideration, and patience I longed for when beginning my career. In 2021 I was contacted by a university and asked to apply for a librarian position. The search committee exhibited some kindness practices, such as providing the interview questions beforehand. Being sufficiently prepared is of great importance to someone suffering from imposter syndrome and anxiety, so having the ability to read through the questions before interviewing removed the sense of dread and fear of the unknown. This meant the world to me. I ultimately declined the opportunity for a second interview, but the experience struck me as significant.

Later that year, I applied for a librarian position at a different university. I was offered a phone interview and a subsequent virtual interview. In both instances, I was provided with the questions so that I could prepare. When invited to the virtual interview, I was given a set of questions that were identical to the first set—I thought, *this must be a mistake*. The search committee chair explained that it was in fact an opportunity: the committee wanted to provide space for me to tweak my responses, add overlooked details, and enhance my anecdotes. They did not want to scare me; they simply wanted me to display my best self. Had this been communicated when the questions were sent for the virtual interview, the intentions would have been clearer.

These experiences would later inform my work with Kristina as we co-chaired a search at KSU in 2022. As Kristina mentioned above, we provided five out of six questions to our candidates three days before their interview date. We devised a list of items we expected and items we did not, and we emphasized that we wanted the best candidate for the position, with an understanding that all-day academic interviews can be grueling and stressful. Our presentation prompt was designed to showcase the strengths of the candidate and provide them with a taste of the work in which they would be involved, rather than a throwaway presentation that engages neither the presenter nor the audience.

The work Kristina and I undertook to create an equitable, kind experience for our candidates should not be lost but expanded. Currently, KSU hiring committees start from scratch each time a new search is conducted. Why reinvent the wheel? Instead, our committees should build upon the advancements of previous searches. As a scholarly communications librarian and proponent of open access, I believe a digital repository of search committee materials would be fitting. Our institutional repository, which prides itself on the inclusion of nontraditional works, is an ideal host. Equitable hiring is not enough—we must standardize and sustain our practices, providing open and free access to our materials so that others may follow our lead.

Karen Doster-Greenleaf, Director of Research and Instructional Services

With nearly 15 years as an academic librarian, I regularly see both sides of the hiring process, and, until recently, found myself compliant to the status quo of standard hiring practices. It wasn't until I began working at KSU that I began to question the disparity of experiences candidates endure despite established, albeit vague, hiring procedures. Although KSU's faculty handbook and HR policies outline basic procedures, they lack depth and consideration for the candidate experience, focusing on administrative structure rather than inclusivity and accessibility. This approach, which is common in many academic libraries,⁵ prioritizes procedural adherence over individual needs, underscoring a broader need for a more humane, candidate-centered shift in hiring practices.

While observing state and institutional hiring requirements is crucial, integrating the library's identity and vision is equally important. However, inconsistencies in our practices have obscured this integration. My conversations with colleagues revealed varied experiences and pinpointed areas for improvement. I was curious to learn more about where we could improve and what parts of the hiring process were potentially the most difficult or important to the candidate. I also wanted to identify where the managers or hiring committees found difficulty. Many colleagues expressed general concerns with how interviews were conducted, but more specifically, the concerns focused on how interview questions were selected, the structure of the interviews, and why interviews varied as much as they did. For example, a faculty librarian who was hired in August had an experience that was different from another hired in March. The common thread was that each search committee and its chair had different directives and resources to conduct the search. After further inquiry, it became clear that similar systemic problems existed for staff searches.

Issues have emerged in faculty librarian searches as well, particularly during on-campus interviews. A recurring concern is the handling of the presentation portion of the interview. Candidates often face uncertainty due to inconsistent communication about the search committee's expectations. Houk and Nielsen note that "harm is created when the process is set up so that candidates do not know what they are being evaluated on, or when there are parts of the process that are intentionally included to be traps or stumbling areas for candidates,"⁶ which, based on my discussions with recently hired colleagues, holds true, as several of our new librarians related to this sentiment. Even though they were the successful candidates, the new librarians expressed feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and a general overwhelming sensation that they were "missing something" when preparing for their presentations.

Additionally, the standard interview structure often lacks clarity about the attendees and purpose of various meetings. We discovered that certain pertinent information was provided during some interviews but not uniformly across all interviews, such as faculty or staff hiring expectations. I'm a firm believer that a candidate is interviewing the employer just as much as we are interviewing them. Therefore, it is crucial to offer every candidate consistent and comprehensive information that provides the opportunity to make their own informed decision as to whether they wish to work for us.

I take comfort in acknowledging that all the missteps made thus far were by-products of disconnect and complacency rather than ill intentions or malice. We know we can and should do better. Aligning our desire to be more consistent with hiring practices across the whole

library requires a comprehensive examination of recruitment procedures and documentation that have been in use over the past five years. The realization prompted more formal open discussions with library administration and unit directors about what our goals for the hiring process could be. We intend to take a bottom-up approach that puts some of the reform process into the hands of those who experienced the process firsthand.

Conclusion

As we move forward with our task force's charge to reform and update the interview process, we aim to proceed intentionally with inclusion at the core. While the tenuous nature of the hiring process is what sparked this project, we understand that a new librarian's hiring experience does not end with the job offer. Our next challenge is to evaluate, improve, and standardize our onboarding procedures. The next phase will center on the candidate's and new hire's needs rather than the institutional status quo. We hope to shift the current intimidating power dynamic and build a more welcoming, empowering, and supporting working environment for our future colleagues. #2

Notes

1. Sojourna Cunningham, Samantha Guss, and Jennifer Stout, "Challenging the 'Good Fit' Narrative: Creating Inclusive Recruitment Practices in Academic Libraries," 2019, 12–21, <https://alair.ala.org/bitstream/handle/11213/17632/ChallengingtheGoodFitNarrative.pdf>; Kathryn Houk and Jordan Nielsen, "Inclusive Hiring in Academic Libraries: A Qualitative Analysis of Attitudes and Reflections of Search Committee Members," *College & Research Libraries* 84, no. 7 (July 2023): 568–88, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.84.4.568>; Mimosa Shah and Dustin Fife, "Obstacles and Barriers in Hiring: Rethinking the Process to Open Doors," *College & Research Libraries News* 84, no. 2 (February 2023): 55–58, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.84.2.55>; Annie Bélanger et al., "Building Inclusive Libraries: Kindness, Equity, and Candidate Experiences in Hiring & Onboarding Toolkit," *Library Reports and Communication*, 2023, 1–62.
2. Houk and Nielsen, "Inclusive Hiring in Academic Libraries."
3. Cunningham, Guss, and Stout, "Challenging the 'Good Fit' Narrative," 17.
4. Normally we advocate for sending all interview questions in advance. However, the position we were screening for did involve being able to speak off-the-cuff, and because of this the committee decided to withhold a single question from the question set sent to candidates. Candidates were informed of this choice and given the reason why when they were sent the questions.
5. Shah and Fife, "Obstacles and Barriers in Hiring."
6. Houk and Nielsen, "Inclusive Hiring in Academic Libraries," 580.