



The Interview Process

A SPEC Kit compiled by

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September 2000

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SURVEY



Executive Summary

Introduction

Interviewing job candidates in a large research or academic library can be difficult for all parties concerned, as well as time consuming. For the librarian who has never experienced the process, the time and preparation involved can be quite overwhelming. Often candidates are completely unprepared for the rigors of the process. For libraries, the interviewing of candidates for a position takes a substantial amount of time and personnel resources. It is important to find ways to interview candidates in an efficient manner in order to reduce the burden on increasingly limited library resources.

The purpose of this survey was to ascertain the nature and structure of the interview process at large research and academic libraries in the United States and Canada, so that, in part, candidates will have a guide to help them prepare for such an interview. From the survey results, candidates will know what types of materials could be requested of them, what are the interview expectations, and how much time the process could take. Libraries, in turn, will benefit by seeing candidates who are better prepared for the process. Additionally, libraries will gain insight into the best practices at peer institutions.

Of the 121 ARL member institutions surveyed, 67 responded, for a response rate of 55%. All institutions except one indicated that they had interviewed at least one candidate for a professional position since January 1999. The respondents' answers provide a clear picture of the basic structure and nature of the interview process for the academic librarian.

Positions Available

Of the positions posted, 41% were entry-level positions, and 34% were mid-level positions, both supervisory and nonsupervisory. Not surprisingly, entry-level positions averaged the highest number of applicants with just over 20 applicants per position. This was closely followed by mid-level, nonsupervisory positions, which averaged

19.2 applicants per position. The range of 10–50 applicants for any level of position was lower than expected. Respondents commented that the applicant pool is largely dependent on the type of position. The more specialized the position, the smaller the applicant pool. In most cases, libraries select 3–4 applicants for the final interview process.

Screening Process

When screening candidates, the curriculum vitae / résumé, cover letter, and names of references are requested by almost all of the responding institutions. Relatively few institutions request letters of reference or an application form. School transcripts are requested by only six institutions. Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) data is often requested, but rarely seen by the library considering the candidate.

Of the materials requested, 94% of the responding institutions consider the vitae / résumé very important. The cover letter is considered somewhat less important, but 58% of the respondents consider it just as important as the vitae. One respondent commented that a cover letter showing good writing skills and enthusiasm for the position could increase the candidate's prospects.

Letters of reference are very important to those institutions that request them, but many respondents commented that they prefer phone references instead. Search committees screen the initial pool of candidates at 94% of the participating institutions, but more than 30% of respondents said that the department head, direct supervisor, and personnel librarian also play a role in the screening process. In several places, the library dean is directly involved in the creation of the final list of candidates. It is not clear from the data received who has the primary decision-making role in the screening stage of the process. The data indicates a need to study in greater detail the role of search committees in the interview and selection process.

Interview Process

Nearly half of the respondents (45%) said that the last filled position in their library was an entry-level position, while the next highest response (21%) was for a mid-level, nonsupervisory position. More frequent turnover and a greater number of positions at the bottom of traditional hierarchies provide possible reasons for the higher number of entry-level positions reported in the survey.

Phone interviews are used by more than half of the libraries (53%), but the majority of these respondents said that the purpose for phone interviews is either to prescreen the final list of candidates (89%) or narrow the field of candidates (77%). This implies that phone interviews are not meant to replace the formal, on-campus interview. Less than half (43%) of those who employ phone interviews said that their purpose is to reduce the cost of bringing candidates to campus for interviews. Other reasons for contacting the candidates by phone included clarifying and expanding on the information in the application materials and explaining the intent to follow up with references. Another institution commented that they call the top pool just to make sure that the candidates are still interested and inform them that their references will be contacted.

The majority of institutions (91%) said that the first meeting in person with the candidates is on campus. There were two exceptions: Candidates were first met at an ALA Midwinter conference, and once a candidate was met on a recruiting trip to a library school. At least 70% of the respondents said that the candidate would meet with each of the following: the immediate supervisor for the position, a library administrator or division head, librarians and staff from the department in which the candidate would work, and librarians and staff from other divisions or units in the library. Surprisingly, 26% of the respondents said that the candidates meet only with the members of the search committee. Forty-two percent of the respondents said that the candidates might meet with a faculty or staff member from outside the library.

Based on the last hire, 59% of the respondents said that the interview process includes a presentation by the candidate. The majority of those who did not require a presentation said that formal presentations are required only for higher-level positions and often depend upon the nature of the position. Although many institutions do not require a formal presentation, it was often noted that

the candidate would answer questions at an open session with library staff.

Nearly all respondents (91%) said that informal lunches or dinners between the candidates and search committees or other staff members are included in the interview process, and 72% of these respondents said that these informal meetings are used as part of the evaluation process. Comments were not requested for this portion of the survey, so it is not clear whether these shared meals compose a formal evaluation or simply a general assessment.

The complete interview process for each candidate averages 1.2 days in length, with 61% of respondents indicating that the whole process takes one day. One institution claimed that the interview process takes only a quarter of a day, while two said it covers three days. It is unclear, however, whether the responses included time for travel or only the formal interview period. Candidates are reimbursed for their travel expenses by 95% of the respondents.

Hiring Decision

The process of hiring is as complex as the interview process itself. The meeting with the search committee was found to be the most influential part of the interview process in terms of making the hiring decision, with 89% ranking the meeting as very important. Nearly 60% of the respondents also ranked the meeting with the director as very important in the process. Thirty respondents said that the application package is very important.

Presentations that candidates give at the interview often cause the greatest amount of interview anxiety, but the survey results indicate that they may not be particularly important in the hiring decision. Only 22 respondents (34%) rated candidates' presentations as very important, and 20 respondents (31%) indicated that presentations are not a part of the interview process. Several respondents commented that presentations are required only of upper-level candidates or for positions in which presentation skills were considered particularly important, such as library instruction positions.

Other meetings noted as important include those with department faculty outside of the library and formal meetings with staff and team members with whom the candidate would be working. Informal meetings with staff were found to be very important by only 11 respon-

dents, but even this figure shows that each portion of the interview process may be important, no matter how informal or peripheral it seems.

In making the final hiring decision, the results show that the library director is the key figure at 62% of the institutions. The search committee made the final hiring decision at 20% of the institutions. However, many institutions noted that although the library director or dean of the libraries makes the final decision, this is done only upon the recommendation of the search committee. The direct supervisor made the final hiring decision at only 8% of the institutions.

Libraries spend a considerable amount of time on the hiring process. The average length of time for the hiring process is 41 days from the time the first candidate is interviewed to the time that the successful candidate is contacted. The average number of days between the interview with the first candidate and the last is 26 days. There is an average of 16 days after the interview with the last candidate before the successful candidate is contacted. In an extreme case, one library reported 281 days between interviewing the first candidate and notifying the unsuccessful candidates.

Contacting the Library after the Interview

In some cases, candidates are uncertain as to whether it is appropriate to contact the library after the interview to find out if a decision has been made. Eighty-six percent of survey respondents said that it is acceptable to contact them after the interview. The majority of institutions suggested that the candidate should wait two to four weeks before contacting the library. Email queries (46%) or phone calls (41%) were reported as being the preferred method of contact. Some institutions noted that the candidates could call concerning the hiring decision, but they would not respond to specific questions concerning the interview.

The Process across Types of Positions

Nearly two-thirds of responding institutions indicated that the interview process is not the same for all positions in the library. The difference in the process depends upon the level of position (78%) or type of position (71%), as well as whether the appointment is a split appointment (15%). Some institutions noted that department heads and higher positions have longer, more extensive interviews.

Other institutions noted that depending upon the position, the people and positions represented on the interview teams may vary.

Conclusion

This survey posed many questions about the nature and process of interviewing in large research libraries. It is quite clear from the results that the onsite interview is an extensive affair for both the candidate and the library. As expected, the vitae/ résumé offers hiring staff the first glimpse of a candidate; nearly 100% of the responding libraries claimed that the first time candidates meet library staff in person is at the campus interview. This interview includes meetings with representatives from nearly every unit of the library and sometimes outside of the library. A public presentation may also be required of the candidate. Although lunches and dinners may be presented as “informal,” they too are part and parcel of the evaluative process. While the search committee’s opinion appears to hold the most weight in the hiring process, so many others are involved in the process that candidates must be prepared for a marathon of meetings until the final hiring decision.

For the library, the hiring process means a substantial commitment in both financial and personnel resources. In most cases, it appears that the brunt of the commitment comes from the administration and the members of the search committee, but the informal meetings and presentations involve many more members of the library staff. This expense in time and resources is justified because connecting the right person to the right job benefits the institution. Hopefully, a fuller knowledge of the demands involved can prepare all parties for the challenging process preceding a new hire.