

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Practice

Searching for an Academic Librarian Job

Techniques to Maximize Success

Angela R. Davis

Angela R. Davis is Engineering Liaison Librarian at The Pennsylvania State University, ard21@psu.edu

Job-hunting can be a confusing process for new librarians searching for their first professional position. Much of the literature available to potential job seekers focuses on general interview etiquette. This article provides advice to expedite the job hunt for academic library positions. The author draws upon personal experience to provide tips for an effective job hunt. These include how to prepare for a job search, locate job announcements, prepare application materials, typical interview procedures, and how to interact with a hiring committee. Additionally, the article provides guidance on how to make the best use of time spent on the job hunt and not get discouraged during the process.

Introduction

Obtaining a master's degree in Library and Information Studies (MLIS) is only the first step in becoming a librarian. It is a scary world out there, especially for those seeking full-time positions. After graduating with an MLIS in 2012, I began submitting job applications with high hopes. Six months later, I was able to find part-time librarian work, but I continued searching for full-time. It took a total of 18 months, 85 job applications, 36 phone interviews, and five on-site interviews before I landed a full-time librarian position. My experience on a lengthy job hunt has given me knowledge that you can use to expedite your own search.

Identifying Your Goal

Before starting, you should have a clear goal in mind. This will help narrow down the number of job announcements to consider and identify those that are the best matches for you. Having answers to the following questions will allow you to have a better picture of your ideal librarian position and have a more efficient job hunt.

- In what kind of library do you want to work? Would you be more comfortable in a large or small university? A community college or a doctoral degree-granting university? Think about how librarians typically interact with their users in each type of institution and how you could leverage your skills in each.
- If you are interested in academic libraries, there are several types of appointments offered. These include contract, continuing, and tenure track. A contract appointment is for a set amount of time, typically no more than two years. A continuing appointment is more permanent, but it may require being reappointed to the position at regular intervals. Tenure track appointments typically do not have a set amount of time and have similar requirements to other academic faculty positions. Faculty requirements usually include instruction, research, and service. You should research the differences in appointment types to better understand the options available while job hunting.
- Librarians have a wide range of duties. What kinds of work are you interested in doing? Examples include reference, instruction, technical services, archives, or a combination. Think about if and how you would like to specialize.
- What special abilities do you have that can make you stand out from other applicants? These abilities can help you focus on positions that allow you to highlight your strengths.
- What non-work related factors would make a job desirable? Are you most comfortable in an urban or rural setting? Does cold or hot weather bother you? These can help narrow down your search by location.
- Do you need to limit yourself to a geographic area? Relatively few states have American Library Association (ALA) accredited programs, a requirement of most librarian jobs. This creates an uneven distribution of qualified librarians. There are many reasons for why some cannot relocate, but if you are willing, there are locations in need of librarians.

By being able to answer these questions, you will have a clear picture of your desired position and can use this to focus your job hunt. Kenney (2013) describes additional factors to consider when job hunting, including a personal narrative, highlighting non-library related experience, and determining the progressive nature of a library. While it is useful to strive to land an ideal position, it is still important to cast a wide net and explore positions that fall outside of the ideal.

Applying

Before you begin applying, your contact information should appear professional. You may regularly check CrazyCatLady123@email.com, but this email address does not convey professionalism. Create an email address that includes your full name or initials to use on job applications (Von Drasek, 2011). It is equally important to have a voicemail message that is professional and respectful. Think about the recordings a professor might leave and model yours to be similar. Also, remember to answer your phone in a pleasant manner. During the job hunt, any unknown caller may lead to a position.

Additionally, it is important to check a variety of job announcement resources. It is useful to find niche resources, such as local job postings or graduate school job lists, to improve your odds of being hired. Social media can also play a role in learning about job announcements. LinkedIn is a tool that you can use to post your resume and make connections with librarians working in the field. It also provides job postings. You should also leverage your personal network, including peers, library workers, and professors. These people may know of job opportunities that you will not learn about in any other way.

Barr (2012) provides an excellent list of common job announcement resources that will aid in your job hunt.

After you have found a job announcement for a position to which you are interested in applying, the next step is to submit the requested materials. These serve as your introduction to the hiring committee. You want to follow all directions and submit error free application materials (Von Drasek, 2011). Proofreading is critical. Additionally, only submit the requested materials. Extraneous items may seem important to you, but they create extra work for the hiring committee (Goldberg & Womack, 1999). Most importantly, only apply to positions for which you meet all the required qualifications. Most job announcements will list required and desired qualifications. Required qualifications are the capabilities a candidate must have in order to be considered for the position. Desired qualifications are abilities that the hiring committee would like to see in a candidate, but they are not a determining factor in the hiring decision. If you also meet the desired qualifications, you may have a higher probability of being selected for an interview.

Use your newly developed research skills to learn about the library and discover what the required qualifications mean to that library. You can find much of this information on the library's website. Research resources available, services provided, mission or value statements, and user populations served. In addition, library policies can indicate the library culture and typical interactions with users. When researching, remember to think like a librarian. Try clicking on staff only links to see how library workers interact with the website. Staff websites tend to include documentation on the nonpublic aspects of using the library, such as workflow policies, reporting structures, and promotion requirements. This information can help you determine how you would fit into the work environment (Kenney, 2013). Also, look beyond the library's webpages to learn about the larger organization. The institution's website can provide insight on the overall populations and the strengths of the organization. It can also be useful to learn about the surrounding community. Typically, the local chamber of commerce will have a website that provides information on local government and activities. Use the knowledge gained during your research to demonstrate to the hiring committee how you would fit into the library, using examples that would be familiar to them.

Hiring committees can easily identify generic application materials. It may seem daunting to create different applications for each announcement, but it becomes easier through the research you do on the library. Uniqueness can be as simple as addressing the cover letter to a specific person on the hiring committee or as complicated as completely new application materials. To expedite the time you spend on applications, create a basic cover letter and resume (Bruce, 2005a). You can modify these documents to highlight specialties that meet requirements for different positions.

The cover letter and resume require different techniques to make them unique. For the cover letter, it is important to highlight your skills and elaborate on how they would be an asset to that library. Be explicit about your skills and how they match the required qualifications. If you leave skills off, the hiring committee may never learn of them. If you have previous library experience, it is important to highlight this, even if you have not worked as a librarian. Your experience working in a library can provide insight on the staff side of library positions. Many hiring committees value this experience over graduate coursework. If you do not have library experience, it is useful to apply for internships, part-time work, or volunteer in a library during your job hunt, which allow you to demonstrate your participation in professional development opportunities. The experience you gain in these positions can be used to bolster your job application.

It may seem more challenging to modify your resume, but little things can be done to make this easier (Wilson-Campbell, 2004). Rearrange your resume to place relevant experience or familiarity with the resources at that

library in a prominent location. This will ensure that the hiring committee will be aware of them. There are many resources available for librarian job hunters to get assistance with their application materials. The American Library Association (2015) maintains a webpage of career development resources that provides information on creating cover letters, interviewing, resumes, and career assessments to determine your strengths. Additionally, your local or state library association, graduate student career center, and public libraries often offer classes or one-on-one assistance with creating and reviewing application materials. Bruce (2005a) offers additional tips on creating a resume and cover letter.

Interviewing

After submitting application materials, the next step is interviewing. For most academic librarian positions, the interview process occurs in two phases: phone and on-site. The hiring committee uses the phone interview to narrow the pool of applicants. Typically, only five to 10 qualified candidates are interviewed by phone. From the pool of phone interviewees, the committee will select one to five candidates to participate in an on-site interview.

The Phone Interview

Each type of interview has different requirements. The phone interview is typically your first conversation with potential coworkers and the library. Generally, phone interviews are scheduled to last between 30 and 45 minutes and consist of a fixed set of questions (Hodge & Spoor, 2012). The questions allow the hiring committee to evaluate your skills and provide insight on how you conduct yourself. Most hiring committees are more interested in hiring a person who is a good fit for the library than one who perfectly meets all the requirements. To prepare for the phone interview, review the job announcement and your application materials. Typically, several weeks will have passed since the time you submitted the application. Having these materials fresh in your mind will better prepare you for the interview. This also ensures you will present yourself as knowledgeable about the position. Hiring committees are looking for candidates that have basic knowledge about the library, the position, and an understanding of how they would fit into the library and its culture.

Some hiring committees interview candidates via video chat instead of phone. While these types of interviews are similar, video chat allows both parties to see each other. This requires you to think about how you visually present yourself to the hiring committee. The same professional dress code for an in-person interview applies. Also consider your background. You may be interviewing in your bedroom, but you would not want the hiring committee to see band posters or stuffed animals. It helps to position yourself in front of a blank wall and test the video settings before the interview. This helps to ensure the committee will focus on you and not your surroundings. There are some advantages to interviewing via video chat. Unlike phone interviews, you can see the faces of the hiring committee. The visual makes it easier to read body language and determine if they understand your answers, but remember they can see you too. Additionally, it is important to have a backup plan if the phone or video feed stops working. Be sure to ask for a phone number where you can reach the hiring committee or quickly send an email outlining the problems you are experiencing. Having a backup plan can make you look more professional and help put you at ease in case something does go wrong. For both phone and video chat interviews, it is important to be in a quiet location free of distractions. This allows your complete focus to be on the interview.

The phone interview is when you can elaborate on how your skills and background match the position requirements. To allow the hiring committee to assess how you would fit into the position, be honest about your skill level. If you lack experience in a particular area be truthful, but you should express your interest in developing those skills. Most hiring committees will have a list of abilities they are looking for in a candidate, but in general, they are most interested in a candidate who is flexible and willing to adapt to their way of working. Hiring committees are

typically more interested in your communication skills than a rote explanation of your abilities. For example, typical questions will require you to provide an example of how you applied a skill to a real life situation or describe interactions you had with co-workers or library users. This is a way for the hiring committee to judge how your personality and skills can fit into the position. Be aware of your weaknesses, but do not continually reference them (Sternberg, 2013). You want the hiring committee to know you are aware of the personal challenges you would have in the position, but should also demonstrate how you would overcome these challenges (Walker, 2011).

A crowdsourced list of questions asked to candidates during their interviews is compiled by HiringLibrarians.com. The list can be seen at <http://bit.ly/1Mfg5H7>

For all types of interviews, remember not to ramble or talk over the hiring committee. You should answer their questions concisely and accurately. If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification. Additionally, do not be afraid of silences. The hiring committee may need time to take notes. You can take this time to gather your thoughts into a coherent answer. Finally, interviewing should not be one-sided. It is important to ask questions of the hiring committee. Your questions should demonstrate that you have researched the library and the institution. You can phrase questions that start with, "I noticed that the library offers this service, how would I interact with that service in this position?" This clearly shows the hiring committee that you have thought about how you would fit into the position. There are also some questions that you should not ask during the phone interview, including salary, vacation, or specific benefits. These types of questions may lead the hiring committee to believe you are only interested in the benefits of the positions and not the job. These types of questions are best left for later interviews or asked to the library's human resources office. Remember interviewing is not an exam; it is a way for both parties to get to know more about each other.

Once the phone interview is over, the hiring committee will decide if you will participate in an on-site interview. In the interim, there are several things that you can do to prepare. One technique that can be useful is to create a personal report of each interview. This report can include questions asked by the hiring committee, questions you asked, and a general feeling of how the interview went. This creates a resource that you can reference in the future to improve your interview techniques. It is also good etiquette to write a thank-you note to the hiring committee. The note should reiterate your interest in the position and highlight key points discussed in the interview (Von Drasek, 2011). You should send it no later than three days after the interview to ensure that you are fresh in the committee's mind. Writing thank-you notes may seem time-consuming, especially for positions in which you are not selected for further interviews, but by doing so, you are leaving the hiring committee with a positive feeling. This could lead to that library reaching out to you when a position they feel you are more suited for becomes available. You want to keep as many options open as possible during the job hunt.

The On-Site Interview

After the phone interview, the next step is the on-site interview. For academic libraries, on-site interviews typically take place over a full day or longer. You can apply much of the same advice from the phone interview to this interview. Before the on-site interview, it is helpful to review the job announcement, your application materials, and any notes you took during the phone interview to ensure you are adequately prepared.

Prior to the on-site interview, the search committee will likely send a packet of information on the position and the library. Included in this packet should be a contact person who will coordinate your interview. Do not hesitate to ask questions of this person (Hodge & Spoor, 2012). It is better to ask beforehand than to arrive on-site and

not know what is expected of you. The packet may also include information on specific duties or requirements the person hired must fulfill. It is important to study this information. Be prepared to answer questions on how you would be able to meet these requirements, using specific examples. By carefully reviewing the documents, you will have an edge on candidates who are less prepared. The decision to interview you came with a hefty investment in time and money and the search committee wants to see you succeed. The more preparation you do, the easier it will be to succeed.

The information packet should also include a schedule for the interview. This should include a list of people or groups that you will be meeting with during the interview. To be better prepared, research the professional background and duties of these individuals and begin to think about how you could work with them (Hodge & Spoor, 2012). This research can be used to create a list of questions for each group to ensure you are asking relevant questions (Bruce, 2005b; Walker, 2011). For example, ask questions about instruction to librarians that regularly teach and questions about a specific service, like citation consultations, to the librarian that implemented this service. This demonstrates that you have extensively prepared for the interview and you are interested in the library's work. Do not be afraid to use a list of questions during the interview. Furthermore, it is good practice to bring business cards or copies of your resume to give to anyone interested. This allows you to leave a tangible reminder of yourself and your skills.

Additionally, everyone you meet with during the interview will ask you multiple questions. These generally fall into several categories and can include questions such as: What interested you in the position? Give an example of a problem you faced on the job and how you overcame it. What is the most challenging aspect of your current job? Describe your research, instruction, or collection development interests. Likely, you will be asked similar questions throughout the interview. Remember to stay consistent and be patient.

Presentations are also a requirement of most academic library on-site interviews. The presentation can range from providing a simulated information literacy session to giving your opinion on the future of libraries. Hiring committees use presentations to evaluate how you convey information to others. You should receive directions on presentation requirements and your intended audience beforehand. If this information is unclear, ask your contact person for clarification. Some questions you may need to ask might include the type of computer equipment available to you and the number of people expected at the presentation. This will ensure that your presentation meets the hiring committee's requirements (Hodge & Spoor, 2012). Furthermore, it is important to make your presentation appealing. Think of elements of presentations that were interesting to you and model yours to be similar. In general, it is best to have interesting graphics and relevant anecdotes. This makes your presentation unique and may help you stand out from other candidates. The interview presentation can be the time to demonstrate non-traditional presentation software, such as *Prezi* (Prezi.com). *Prezi* allows you to create presentations that incorporate movement and to easily use graphics to make your presentation interesting. Additionally, most academic library hiring committees will want to see references. This means you should do background research on the presentation topic and include these citations in your presentation. To prepare for the presentation, practice in front of others and embrace their constructive criticism. This will make your presentation smoother on the interview day and help prepare you for the types of questions that may be asked. The more practice you have, the more comfortable you will be during your presentation. This will give you an air of confidence which is essential to hiring committees.

Another component of many academic library on-site interviews is a meal. You may be told that the meal is not part of the interview, but do not fall into the trap of being too casual. You are always interviewing. Your behavior during the meal gives the hiring committee an indication of how you interact socially with others. Remember to be polite to the wait staff and pick something easy to eat. You will be asking and answering questions during the meal, so it is best not to order a complicated dish. Remember you are being evaluated not only on your qualifications but also to see if you would be a good fit in the library's culture.

After the Interview

At some point during the interview process, the hiring committee will contact your references. Most job applications request three to four professional references. It can be useful to have a supervisor or senior colleague at your current workplace be your reference (Roberts, 1999). However, if you feel they would provide an unflattering reference you should omit them. Be prepared to answer why you did not choose them, as the hiring committee may be curious. If you do not have enough professional references, it can be useful to include people who can give good character references. These can include library school professors or volunteer group leaders. To help your references be prepared, provide them with regular updates on your job hunting progress. It can be helpful to send your references a note on how you believe you are qualified for the position. This can aid them in reiterating similar points as you did in your application materials and interviews to paint a consistent image for the hiring committee.

After the on-site interview is complete, it can take several weeks to several months to learn if you will be offered the position. The hiring committee has multiple tasks to complete before a job offer can be made. Typically, the committee needs to agree on a candidate, gain approval from an administrator, and then complete background or affirmative action checks. These tasks can take several days to several months due to committee work schedules or delays in returned background checks. After the on-site interview, you should send thank-you notes to each individual or group that met with you. It may be difficult, but you should wait at least one month before inquiring about your progress in the search. Pestering the library for updates will not speed up their decision. Any good library organization will inform you on your status in a timely manner. During the waiting period it is best to continue applying to other positions. Patience and persistence is required. Keep your options open and do not miss other opportunities. Offers to accept positions are typically made via phone, while rejections are done via a letter.

Conclusion

The job hunting process can be quite lengthy. It boils down to the ability to market yourself effectively and demonstrate how you are the best candidate for the position. Unfortunately, not all applications will result in job offers. Use each unsuccessful application and interview as an opportunity to reflect, improve your interviewing skills, and build your professional network. If you stick with it, you will eventually find a position that is the best fit for you.

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