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Challenging the 'Good Fit' Narrative: Creating Inclusive Recruitment Practices in Academic Libraries

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Creating Inclusive Recruitment Practices in Academic Libraries

Sojourna Cunningham, Samantha Guss, and Jennifer Stout[*]

Introduction

Academic libraries operate under the assumption that there is one "right candidate" for a multi-layered position and that a search committee, a group of individuals formed with the purpose of assisting a responsible administrator in the recruiting and screening of candidates for a posted academic position, is the fairest and most equitable approach to hiring academic librarians. That assumption is running up against the fact that libraries and academic libraries in particular have an acknowledged a problem with recruiting and retaining librarians of color. According to the latest edition of the American Library Association Diversity Counts report, librarianship remains an overwhelmingly white profession: approximately 88% of credentialed academic librarians are white.[1] There are countless articles bemoaning the state of racial diversity in librarianship and multiple research studies have made recommendations for creating a better culture for diversity, assessing diversity initiatives in librarianship, and retaining librarians of color. However there are no empirical research studies in library literature that have examined the ways in which libraries hire and recruit librarians for diversity. In fact much of the literature perpetuates the idea of hiring a candidate who is a "good cultural fit," which ultimately is a practice of reproducing the status quo. This paper examines the ways in which hiring practices in academic libraries perpetuate whiteness and undermine libraries' attempts to recruit for diversity.

Review of the Literature

There are several broad categories of literature on hiring in academic libraries. In the first category are the procedural best practices guides like the ACRL Guidelines for Recruiting Academic Librarians,[2] a manual for hiring academic law librarians,[3] and articles that aim to update or modernize practices.[4] Beyond these how-to guides, there is also literature that aims to investigate effectiveness, critique, or advance new ideas about aspects of library hiring practices. A few examples are an investigation of phone interviews,[5] an evaluation of a standing search committee model,[6] and assessments of search committee effectiveness.[7]

Many of the issues identified by these authors come up again and again: library search committee members are not trained on how hire effectively; our search committees are comprised of library staff from across the organization, but we are not very good at understanding our colleagues' jobs and therefore have trouble assessing candidates; and we tend not to follow best practices such as structured interviewing and using rubrics for assessment.

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Lehner points out that our interview schedules usually include multiple sessions with staff other than committee members and "open sessions" where anyone can attend and ask anything (effectively the opposite of structured interviewing).[8] Likewise, the library literature on hiring is heavily focused on the activities of the search committee, while in practice the search committee represents only one piece of the interview process.

While many of these best practices have been circulating for a long time and match closely with the library hiring challenges that have been identified over and over, there is very little empirical evidence in our literature about how academic libraries conduct recruitment and hiring and which, if any, of these guidelines are actually in use.

Hiring a Diverse Workforce

A few publications, such as the 2017 version of the ACRL Guidelines for Recruiting Academic Librarians, do address equity in hiring and advise on issues of maintaining fairness, encouraging a diverse pool, recruiting from underrepresented groups, being aware of unconscious bias,[9] but there is generally not much library literature about how to successfully attract and hire and retain people of color (POC).

Much of what we know about libraries' intentions in this area comes from a 2017 ARL SPEC Kit survey of directors of ARL-member libraries. While 80% of respondents indicated that their libraries are working on "strategies specifically to increase the pool of ethnically/culturally diverse job applicants,"[10] only 15% of respondents said they're assessing their diversity recruitment efforts,[11] so these results remain largely anecdotal. About two thirds of respondents said that they encountered barriers to hiring POC. Those cited most often were: perceptions that the library's geographic area or community were unwelcoming to POC; concerns about the lack of diversity in the library's parent institution; and concerns that the candidate pool for POC librarians is too small and LIS programs are graduating too few POC.[12]

Others have explored how academic libraries' institutional culture of whiteness obstructs any efforts at increasing diversity. A culture of whiteness "refers not only to racial and ethnic categorizations but a complete system of exclusion based on hegemony… it also stands as a marker for the privilege and power that acts to reinforce itself through hegemonic cultural practice that excludes all who are different."[13] Honma describes whiteness in libraries as largely invisible and elusive, and "allows for constant reinvention and rearticulation to protect the interests of a white racial ruling class."[14] Hathcock argues that white centered practices permeate all aspects of librarianship. This whiteness ultimately creates binaries, where people who are not part of the dominant norm are classified as an "other." Those who do not fit in the binary are urged to assimilate and if they are not willing to assimilate, they should leave the profession.[15]

It is well documented that institutional culture in academic libraries has not been welcoming to people of color. Thornton surveyed African-American female librarians and found that one third of the respondents reported feelings of isolation. More disturbingly, 70 out of 98 respondents reported experiencing racial discrimination—and those who had such experiences had higher rates of job dissatisfaction.[16] Riley-Reid discusses the implicit and explicit barriers librarians of color must often confront in the workplace, including cold or hostile work environments, a lack of support for work-life balance, and the isolation of being the "token" minority in the workplace.[17]

Perhaps one of the more insidious barriers to job satisfaction that librarians of color face is racial microaggressions. Racial microaggressions can be defined as, "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color because they belong to a racial minority group."[18] Alabi found that when she surveyed 139 librarians of all racial backgrounds, the librarians who belonged to racial minority groups (30% of respondents) either observed or experienced microaggressions firsthand more often than white librarians.[19]

Walker applied critical race theory, a theoretical framework that uses race as the central point of inquiry when examining issues related to law and power, to analyze the recruitment and retention processes of librarians of color. Operating under the fact that librarians of color report discriminatory process in their hiring, retention and promotion, Walker traces the history and support of African-American librarians in library education and training. She found that the white-centered history and practices of librarianship systematically invalidates African-American librarians and other librarians of color. Programs aimed at increasing diversity in the professions inherently suggest that problems with libraries lie with the librarians of color not assimilating with the practices of libraries, rather than an acknowledgement that libraries are inherently white-centered institutions.[20]

Our culture of whiteness is evident in our hiring practices as well. Sensoy and DiAngelo argue that academic fields ultimately reproduce the status quo of whiteness when hiring.[21] They believe "whiteness [is] a set of cultural practices that go unmarked and unnamed" and in a typical academic hiring scenario, those practices remain stable and ultimately replicate dominant practices.[22] Galvan also details the many ways that academic library hiring processes reinforce and replicate existing culture.[23] In both of these papers, the authors recommend breaking existing practices and using every job search as an opportunity to correct the imbalance of power in academic libraries and mindfully recruit for diversity.

"Fit" in Hiring

One pervasive feature of hiring in academic libraries is discussion about a candidate's "fit." While there has been some discourse in the literature about hiring for "good fit," our profession is only beginning to connect this mindset to its potential influence on our stated diversity goals.

"Fit" in hiring has been studied extensively in the organizational psychology and human resources management (HRM) fields since the 1980s. Kristof makes the important distinction between person-organization (P-O) fit, person-job (P-J) fit, and person-vocation (P-V) fit.[24] Although library hiring is ostensibly designed to measure P-J fit and P-V fit, when we discuss "fit" in library hiring, we're almost always referring to P-O fit. Many corporations and organizations do look for P-O fit in their candidates and much has been written about the benefits of this approach. More salient for our study though, is that authors in these disciplines have raised the issue that P-O fit can threaten diversity initiatives.[25]

We also learn from this body of literature that one of the most important things an organization can do when hiring for P-O fit is to spend time defining what their organizational culture is and what "fit" means to them before the hiring process begins.[26] Powell, writing in the journal *Organizational Dynamics*, concedes that there are times when it makes more sense to hire for strong P-O fit, but argues that there are other times when the best thing for the organization would be to strive for "extending fit," where the candidate is outside the organization's fit comfort zone. A few examples when extending fit is a better goal are when the department or organization has a high degree of contact with customers and when the department or organization serves diverse customers: scenarios that describe many academic libraries.[27]

Fit comes up fairly often in the library literature as well, but it is often presented uncritically, usually in pieces designed to help job-seekers understand what search committees are looking for.[28] Hodge and Spoor found that "personality/attitude" and "fit for your institution" were more important than education, experience, and personal experience in choosing an entry-level candidate.[29] In their study of employment and recruitment practices of librarians, Wang and Guarria, found that when hiring, search committees believed that potential fit within a department was more important than demonstrated performance on the job, scholarship, service, and previous job experience. They also found that only 37% used a weighted scoring system. Respondents felt that such a scoring system was "too prescribed and might minimize their ability to use subjectivity."[30]

In addition, there are a handful of articles in which the authors argue that fit is good and necessary in selecting the best candidate, because of things like reduced turnover and easier onboarding.[31] Reed, in an article partially titled "Finding More Like Us," argues that community college libraries must use fit to hire the right librarians, but declines to provide a definition, instead explaining that fit defies easy classification, can't be truly described, and must be determined "intuitively" or "viscerally."[32] Many articles on hiring mention screening candidates for how well they seem to fit in with, or get along with, existing staff. In general, the literature indicates that many library search committees are evaluating candidates on measures of "fit," but also suggests that fit is not well-defined and can mean very different things in different contexts.

More recently, a few writing in the LIS literature have started to question our profession's reliance on "a good fit," notably Farkas[33] and Vinopal[34] in blog posts on bias in library hiring practices, and Bradshaw, writing about talent management in the book, *Where Are All the Librarians of Color?*[35] Galvan describes how library hiring practices reflect the whiteness of our profession at every turn and though we say we want to hire a diverse workforce, practices designed in a culture of whiteness can only replicate whiteness.[36]

Methodology

To begin addressing some of these issues with empirical data, we decided to create a survey of library directors, who we believed would have the broadest understanding of how recruitment, interviewing, and hiring took place at their libraries. Likewise, their definitions of "fit" would likely have influence in their libraries, even if they didn't directly take place in each hiring process.

We drew survey questions from the ARL SPEC Kit 356: Diversity & Inclusion (September 2017), which asked several questions about plans, practices, and perceived barriers to hiring a diverse workforce.[37] In addition to the SPEC Kit survey questions, we included questions about procedural issues (e.g. who is responsible for writing interview questions, how are committees formed) and a direct question asking respondents what a "good fit" means to them in the context of hiring. Finally, we included several demographic questions about the size, focus, and location of the library in question. The survey questions were a combination of closed- and open-ended, and we expected that the majority of our analysis would be qualitative in nature.

Of course the SPEC Kit survey only reached directors of the ARL libraries, which are few in number and are all research intensive institutions. While knowing what ARL libraries are working on is often beneficial for all of us, we wanted to hear from a broader cross-section of academic libraries. Therefore, we wanted our survey to include a variety of library and institution sizes, libraries with different missions and foci, and libraries who hire often and those who only hire occasionally.

To make our project more feasible, we limited our sample to 270 library directors at colleges and universities in ten states in the southeastern part of the United States: Tennessee, South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Maryland. Lists of colleges were generated using Wikipedia and lists of members of regional consortia such as the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL), the Mid Atlantic Library Alliance (MALiA), and the Oberlin Group. Colleges and universities, including community colleges, were included if they were non-profit and not classified as "Special Focus Institutions" by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education (examples would be health professions schools or faith-related institutions such as seminaries). Once the list of colleges and universities was finalized, names and contact information for library directors was compiled using information available on library websites.

The survey was administered using Qualtrics survey software and was distributed using the Qualtrics email tool. This allowed us to keep track of who had already taken the survey while still keeping results anonymous. The survey was first distributed on July 11, 2018, and the final response was recorded August 22, 2018.

While we used the summary data provided by Qualtrics for a quantitative understanding of our results, much of our analysis was qualitative. Open-ended responses were coded using a grounded theory approach.

Results

We sent the survey to the library directors of 270 colleges and universities across the southeastern United States. We received a total of 54 completed surveys, for a 20% response rate. 53% of respondents described their institution as public and 47% described their institutions as private. The majority of respondents (~65%) described their institutions as having student bodies of 10,000 or less.

We asked several questions about the job ad promotion and the interview process that are particularly relevant to recruiting for diversity. We asked where the job ad was posted and the most cited places for advertisement were: the university website (88.9%), general library listservs (87%), job-seeking websites specific to higher education (81.5%), and domain specific listservs (72.2%). These are not particularly surprising. Fewer said they post to listservs specific to ethnic caucuses (46.3%) or recruited directly from LIS programs (44.4%). "Other" responses were mostly regional library association or consortium listservs and religious-focused library listservs.

An important tool for inclusive interview practices is the use of a rubric to make sure the same criteria is used to evaluate candidates. 65% respondents said they utilize a rubric during interviews and it is modified based on the specific position. 11% said they use a uniform rubric for all positions. 26% said they do not use rubrics.

Another crucial tool for inclusive recruiting is collecting data on job searches. When respondents were asked if their library collects data on job searches. 41% said "always," 19% said "sometimes," 30% said "never," and 11% said "other," with additional notes such as "pools are small, data would be meaningless" or that they have a "general sense" of numbers. A few mentioned that an entity outside the library/search committee collects it, such as HR.

A tactic to get an understanding of the candidate's knowledge and experience with diversity and inclusion is to ask them a question about that very issue during the interview (for example, "What does it mean to you to have a commitment to diversity and inclusion?"). 24% respondents said they always ask the candidates about diversity and inclusion, 56% said they sometimes do, depending on the search committee or position, 13% said they never do, and 7% said "other."

When asked what "good fit" meant to them in the context of hiring, the answers varied and were often intangible. Words like "flexible," "positive attitude," "collegial," "confident," and "friendly" were used. Some respondents stated that good fit related to culture, that the hire had to "hit it off" with the team or interact successfully with colleagues during the interview or would "integrate into workplace culture." They would have to interact positively with current staff and be "adaptable to the current market." Others spoke of being mission-oriented and responsive to community needs. When speaking of mission, several respondents explained that the schools were religiously affiliated and that the hire had to support religious values. Two respondents explained that they look for gaps to be filled, meaning that they don't seek to duplicate the skill sets already present in their employees and that new candidates should not have the same domain knowledge as employees already present in the organization.

Others stated that fit was more faculty oriented and that hires had to have a proven record of academic and professional success or had to demonstrate an ability to thrive in a tenure track environment.

Several respondents made mention of diversity and stated that the hire had to show an interest in culturally inclusive environments and/or student diversity. Two people stated that they hated the term "good fit" even though it was consistently used in hiring culture. They said good fit often translates to status quo and is ultimately coded language that represents a lack of willingness to challenge conventions.

We asked respondents if their libraries have developed any strategies specifically to increase the diversity of the candidate pool. 39% said yes, 24% said no, and 37% said "not yet, but we plan to." We asked those who responded in the affirmative to describe these strategies. The most commonly mentioned strategies were having "minimal required qualifications" and "direct recruiting of diverse candidates" as well as efforts to promote the job directly to potential candidates of color (as well as LGBTQ candidates) on listservs aimed at underrepresented groups.

When asked if respondents had encountered any perceived barriers to developing a diverse candidate pool, 60% said yes and 40% said no. Among those who answered yes, we encouraged them to describe those barriers. Eight respondents said the region/locality of their institution was not attractive to potential candidates. Seven respondents claimed the candidate pool itself was not diverse or was too small. Six respondents said the salary for the position was not competitive. Other barriers mentioned include the lack of diversity in the library profession in general, the search process being too lengthy, and lack of diversity on campus/among the faculty.

A follow-up question asked respondents how they have addressed these barriers and responses included attempts to increase salaries, the promotion of other benefits, such as faculty status, attempts to speed up/improve the search process, keeping the job ad posted for longer and promoting it in a variety of places, hiring a diversity fellow and supporting diversity scholarships, and having candidates meet with diverse faculty/staff during the interview.

Our final question was to ask if there was anything else the respondents would like to say with regards to hiring. The comments were broad, but a few categories emerged: identifying additional barriers to hiring, noting additional recruitment strategies, comments supporting diversity in general, and comments downplaying the importance of diversity (specifically, "diversity should never trump talent; being the best at what you do, regardless of race, color, creed, etc should outweigh race, color, creed, etc" as well as a comment that Christian identity trumps other aspects in hiring at a religious school).

Discussion

In conducting our survey, we discovered some of the same issues and barriers to recruiting for diversity that were touched on in the literature. For example, fewer than half the respondents "always" collect data on job searches, which makes it difficult to assess how well institutions are hiring for diversity over time. In the ARL SPEC Kit 356, only 15% of institutions surveyed said they are assessing their diversity recruitment efforts.[38] It is data from job searches that allows us to assess such efforts, and the majority of our respondents said they "sometimes" or "never" collect such data. Similarly, the literature recommends structured interviewing techniques such as uniform rubrics and asking each of the candidates the same set of questions. However, our survey suggests that many libraries do not consistently utilize these techniques. Rubrics are not always used and if so, they are often not uniform.

Our qualitative questions gave us the richest data. We found that when asked to describe what "a good fit" means to their institution, more often than not, respondents used personality-based terms such as "collegial," "confident," and "friendly." Others mentioned "hitting it off" with the rest of the team or department they would be working in. These descriptors recall the literature of "fit" in hiring which is often undefinable, intangible, and thus allows for libraries to stay within their comfort zones and replicate the status quo.

Although 60% of respondents replied in the affirmative that they recognized barriers to diversity in their candidate pools, only 39% said they were actively taking steps to remedy that lack of diversity. Another 37% said they are not currently using strategies to increase the diversity in candidate pools but that they "plan to." This recognition that there is a problem, but putting off addressing it is perhaps the crux of our research—that as a profession, we *know* there is a distinct lack of diversity—particularly racial diversity—and yet when asked how we are addressing it, it is either something we put off indefinitely or try to address in one step, for example

by hiring a diversity resident for a year. But as the research shows, increasing diversity in the library profession and practicing inclusive recruitment and retention is not a one-step process, but an ongoing effort to change the culture of whiteness inherent in libraries.

Some of the best practices to make libraries more inclusive are relatively simple and straightforward, and in fact some of our respondents reported they are doing these things already: having minimal required qualifications in job ads, which helps prevent people of color and women from self-selecting out; directly recruiting people of color and making sure to post job ads on listservs and websites aimed at people of color and other underrepresented groups; collecting data on searches to see how the racial and gender makeup of the institution changes over time (acknowledging that this is imperfect since some forms of diversity are invisible); using a uniform rubric for all candidates interviewing for a position and making sure to ask all candidates the same questions and give them roughly the same interview experience. These are all practical, simple, measurable steps libraries can take to diversify their candidate pools and engage in inclusive hiring practices.

Additionally, institutions can work toward making positions at their library more attractive to a wide range of candidates. Competitive salaries and benefits, a commitment to work-life balance, opportunities for professional development, and funds for travel and research all go a long way to making a position desirable for a higher number of candidates and also encourage people to stay once they are hired.

Libraries can work to educate their employees about racial microaggressions, unconscious bias, and manifestations of white-centered thinking in search and hiring procedures, including the perils of evaluating candidates on their "fit." Requiring hiring/search committee training as a prerequisite to participating in a search committee is an excellent idea as it can help potential search committee members become aware of their own biases and develop tools to approach the search process equitably and objectively, as well as understand legal issues in hiring. Since library candidates nearly always interact with more than just search committee members, it would be even better if this training were required for all library staff.

The library profession as a whole can and should fight systemic racism and cultivate a culture of inclusivity by electing more people of color for leadership positions in professional associations; listening and empowering those people when they are in leadership positions; creating scholarships for potential library students who may not be able to afford graduate school (as well as working to reduce tuition costs); building networks of mentors and professional contacts for librarians of color; making sure that conference programs include speakers and presenters of color and from underrepresented backgrounds, and continuing to hold honest conversations about race and whiteness in the profession in large public conferences and making sure that it is not only people of color who attend those sessions.

More importantly, white librarians should educate themselves on racism, microaggressions, and bias and work on fighting bias within themselves and standing up when they see it play out in their workplaces or in their personal lives. They should listen to librarians of color and validate their experiences. Everyone can work to challenge racism in their communities. One of the most commonly mentioned barriers to inclusive hiring our respondents touched on was that the region/location of their libraries is not attractive to candidates, especially candidates of color. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves "why is that?" and "what can we do to change it?"

These steps are ongoing and cannot be completed in one meeting—they are about doing the work of allyship and challenging white supremacy and white-centered thinking within our profession, our institutions, and ourselves. Ultimately, getting outside of the "good fit narrative" will allow us to take steps to increase diversity of all kinds in our field and make the profession more welcoming and inclusive for all. It will help us hire talented individuals who will bring unique perspectives to our institutions and strengthen our profession. The idea of the "good fit" is indeed only good for one thing: replicating the status quo and allowing us to not work on a problem many of us clearly see.

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