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Nothing Happens Unless First a Dream: Demystifying the Academic Library Job Search and Acing the Application Process

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Abstract

Academic library positions can be highly desirable for both new librarians and experienced librarians interested in transitioning into a different setting. Yet for both novice and experienced librarians alike, landing an interview for an academic librarian position can feel intimidating and overwhelming. Applicants may have difficulty understanding tenure track requirements, no academic library experience, no coursework in relevant areas, and may be competing with a large pool of qualified candidates. When academic job openings ask for years of academic library experience and library school specializations suggest that the path you pick is the path you keep until retirement, it begins to feel as though finding a position in an academic library is an insurmountable endeavor. As three librarians who have successfully made the move into an academic setting, we can attest that although the way may be unclear, this goal is not impossible to achieve. This paper will explain some of the facets unique to the academic setting with which applicants might not be familiar, how to tailor application materials to an academic position and why this is crucial for success, and how to acclimate to new responsibilities and expectations.

On Universities and Labor

Terms and Definitions

To begin, some definitions may be useful as many of these terms are unclear, or are used interchangeably. To have faculty status means having similar rights, privileges, and responsibilities as teaching faculty, whereas tenure refers to the availability of a continuous appointment and permanent employment. Many universities practice shared governance, which means faculty participate in the planning and decision-making process, typically through elected representation—such as a faculty senate—and committees.

Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education can be helpful in understanding the culture and expectations of the institution at which you may be interested in working. Created by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in 1970, Carnegie Classifications describe institutional diversity in U.S. higher education. At the basic level, institutions are classified as doctorate-granting universities, master's colleges and universities, baccalaureate colleges, associates colleges, special focus institutions, or tribal colleges. An institution's classification also includes information on the undergraduate instructional program, the graduate instructional program, an enrollment profile, an undergraduate profile, the school's size and setting, and if the school puts an emphasis on community engagement.

Variations on Faculty Status

Each university handles the classification and promotion process for its faculty differently. Many start their faculty with some sort of probationary period, with reappointment happening every one to two years. The reappointment process may include a review by university peers or by committee, and often involves some sort of portfolio or dossier. Depending on the institution, a librarian's rank may be tenure track faculty, non–tenure track faculty, or administrative.

A 2016 survey of 124 academic libraries revealed that 52% grant nominal faculty status to librarians. This number was lower than what was found by a 2008 study. Additionally, faculty status is most common at public institutions, not private, and is less common at universities near the top of the U.S. News rankings (Walters, 2016). While some schools do not grant tenure, many offer a continuing or permanent appointment.

Lastly, titles vary among institutions. Librarian I, II, III, or IV (seniority increases with the number) is not

uncommon, while other schools follow the assistant, associate, and full professor track like typical teaching faculty.

Criteria for Reappointment and Promotion

Review processes vary from one institution to the next. At Western Carolina University (WCU), librarians have tenure-track faculty status and the library is considered one of the university's colleges. Tenure-track librarians go up for reappointment in each of their first six years of employment. In years one through five, the librarian is evaluated by their departmental committee and the college committee, and each committee votes on whether the librarian should be reappointed. In a librarian's sixth year, they are eligible for tenure and promotion to associate professor. In addition to being reviewed and voted on by their department and college, a sixth-year librarian is also reviewed and voted on by the university-level collegial review committee. If a librarian is recommended for tenure, the decision is passed on to the chancellor and the Board of Trustees for their approval.

For years one, three, and five, a tenure-track librarian need only submit an application for reappointment. In years two, four, and six, the librarian prepares both an application for reappointment as well as a dossier. The dossier documents the librarian's accomplishments in the areas of teaching/librarianship, scholarship, and service. The expectations for these areas are detailed in their departmental collegial review document. At WCU, the dossier consists of a cumulative report that documents a librarian's achievements from the beginning of their employment through the current review year; a narrative statement in which the librarian highlights their accomplishments in each of the three areas, focusing on how their work has supported student success; and appendices in which the librarian provides examples of their work and its impact.

Vocational Awe

Fobazi Ettarh (2018) explains that librarians are prone to suffering from vocational awe, a concept that "refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique" (Introduction, para. 3). This pitfall, coupled with the demands of the tenure track, can easily lead librarians to overextend themselves as they try to meet the demands of the position. Be sure to take time for self-care, set healthy boundaries, and build a fulfilling life outside of work. Additionally, as universities move toward using more contingent and adjunct labor, be aware of the privileges tenure brings and take it upon yourself to advocate for those without that privilege.

On Application Materials and Interview Preparation

Application Materials

Cover Letter

Your cover letter is, arguably, the most important piece of your application materials. A resume tells what you did, but a cover letter shows why it was important. You may be applying to several positions that look quite similar on paper, but avoid using one cover letter for all applications. It is incumbent upon you, the candidate, to show the search committee your ability to succeed in their library, and your cover letter is the first piece of evidence to support your case.

A simple way to help tailor a cover letter is to borrow language from the job ad. It can be helpful to make a word cloud using the job ad. An alternate option is to read the job ad with highlighter in hand to identify the words or phrases that stand out to you or that appear repeatedly. By taking the time to do this step, you will identify themes around which you can structure your letter and you will be sure that you are addressing the position's qualifications.

It is of the utmost importance to speak to the position's required qualifications. By directly addressing these qualifications in your cover letter, you are better positioning yourself to get an interview. Cover letters are not a time for humility, but make sure that what you are claiming to have accomplished is accurate and is something you can talk about comfortably and fluently, since you might be asked about it later if you are invited for an interview.

The traditional rule of a one-page cover letter does not apply in academia. You are welcome to use two pages, but if you do, keep the following in mind: the longer length is not an invitation to add filler; everything in your cover letter should pack a punch.

Before submitting your application packet, send your cover letter to a trusted friend or colleague. It can

be easy to miss a mistake on a document, so having a fresh set of eyes can help catch any remaining errors, such as using an incorrect university name (it happens more often than you might think). Many of us fall into the habit of downplaying our accomplishments, so listen to your proofreader if they urge you to expand on the importance of a particular accomplishment.

Curriculum Vitae or Resume

If you are straight out of graduate school, you may not have a lot of work experience to include on your curriculum vitae (CV) or resume. If you served on any committees as a student or were a contributing member of an organization, be sure to include that information. Likewise, if you presented at a conference as a student, include that information to show the search committee you can produce scholarly works. Take time to tease out transferable skills from previous positions, even those outside libraries.

A Final Note

Before you submit your application, convert your cover letter and CV or resume to PDFs. This will ensure that the search committees sees these documents in the exact layout you intended.

Interview Preparation

Be a Curious Tourist

If all goes well, you will be invited to interview on campus, and this is where the real preparation begins. Learn everything you can about the library, the university, and the area. Spend time navigating the library's website, research guides, and calendar.

Read any and all information sent to you. This will often include literature about the university as well as the detailed schedule for your interview. If the position for which you are applying is tenure track, it may also include a copy of the departmental collegial review document, which is the document outlining in exquisite detail the criteria by which you would be evaluated in this position.

Practice

Practice interviewing over and over again. Recruit a friend or colleague to do mock interviews with you. Your answers should be succinct but complete, and practicing can help you refine your responses.

Academic librarian interviews often include a presentation or job talk. Make sure that you address each piece of the prompt and that your visual (e.g., PowerPoint or Prezi) adds to rather than detracts from your presentation. Do not spend so much time preparing your presentation that you fail to practice sample interview questions.

Prepare Sample Questions

In each meeting on the day of your interview, you will be given time to ask questions. Prepare sample questions in advance. When you leave your interview, you want to make sure you have a good understanding of whether you think the institution is a good fit for you. Nerves and exhaustion make it easy to forget the questions you have or come up with questions extemporaneously, so bring a prepared list of questions with you.

Do a Visualization Exercise

The night before your interview, consider doing a visualization exercise. You are at the point at which you have prepared all you can, and a visualization exercise can help move your focus away from worrying about a perceived lack of preparation and on to a successful interview. A quick Google search will give you many great pre-interview visualization exercises.

The Interview

Over the course of a day or two, you will meet with various constituents from the library and the university at large. It is a tiring experience and all the librarians with whom you will meet have been through it. They will be understanding and empathetic, but they will also want to see that you are able to maintain your composure despite being exhausted.

Lunches, dinners, tours, and receptions will all inform others' perceptions of you, so do not get too relaxed during these times. Be yourself but still treat these events as part of the interview process. Your responses and behaviors will be remembered and may be offered as feedback to the search committee.

Constantly being "on" and scrutinized is draining, so take advantage of any and all breaks offered to you. Even if you do not need to use the bathroom, take the opportunity to be by yourself, take a couple breaths, and do some stretches.

At the end of the interview, set aside a few minutes to reflect on the experience while it is still fresh in

your head. Congratulate yourself for things you did well and make note of those areas you would like to improve upon in future interviews. Then celebrate!

On Expectations

Specialized Roles

Most academic librarians have specialized roles within their respective departments that require expertise in a certain area. This means you will be the go-to person for guidance and information related to your area of focus. Those who are transitioning from another type of library may experience a period of adjustment as they acclimate to such a specialized role. This may be especially true for those who are used to juggling multiple disparate responsibilities, as is often the case for public and school librarians.

In order to gain expertise and confidence in your new position, it is important to have a solid grasp of the position's areas of responsibility. Join listservs and, if applicable, review core competencies defined by a professional organization for your specialization; these may help inform your understanding of your new position and its role in your institution. It can also help to reread your position description. You may not have looked at the description since your interview, and revisiting it once in the position can help you identify and prioritize your approach. Your supervisor likely will have identified areas that need immediate attention, and meeting regularly with your supervisor will help keep you on the right track.

If your library does not have a formal mentor program in place, seek one out on your own. The decision to find a mentor who is internal to or external from your library will depend on whether you need guidance with your specialization or if you need someone to shepherd you through facets and situations unique to your institution. If choosing an external mentor, be aware that the landscape of their institution may differ greatly from yours, so try not to get discouraged if they are able to do things in their library that you cannot do in yours.

New Responsibilities

As with any new position, the first few weeks will be busy with orientations, training, and meetings. However, even with a robust training program there may be times during which you experience imposter syndrome and fear being seen as a fraud. Nobody will be able to stop you from feeling this way, but remember that you were hired because the search committee saw qualities they liked and thought you would be the best fit for the job.

In addition to joining listservs and reading library literature relevant to your responsibilities, there are a number of other strategies to help you get acquainted with your new role. One tactic is to schedule meetings with coworkers you anticipate working with closely, both inside and outside the library. For example, subject liaisons will want to meet with faculty in their subject areas and librarians responsible for licensing may benefit from meeting with university legal counsel to learn best practices for having licenses reviewed and signed. Requesting these meetings has many benefits including (re) introducing you to colleagues, revealing areas for collaboration, and learning communication preferences.

It is not uncommon for librarians to have supervisory duties. Just as librarian roles are more specialized in academic libraries, the staff roles are, too. Respect their knowledge and expertise. Understand what their responsibilities are so that you are able to delegate projects as they align with their position.

Finally, be flexible and open to new opportunities. As the way we acquire, research, and disseminate information continues to evolve, our roles in the library will do the same.

Conclusion

While the process may seem daunting, we hope this whirlwind introduction gives you a foundation for your job search. Additional support materials and a reading list can be found at https://tinyurl.com /clc18dream.

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