

# The Language of DEI: Early Career Librarians' Perceptions of DEI Language in Job Ads

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the job search process for recent library and information science (LIS) graduates and early career librarians, particularly how they perceive language related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in LIS job ads. Data collected through eight focus groups (n = 34) and 11 semi-structured interviews, were coded and analyzed. Researchers found that applicants lack trust in “boilerplate” DEI statements but still look for DEI information as a potential indicator of alignment with personal values. A lack of DEI information was seen as a red flag, but not a deterrent to applying for a position. And while some applicants did not look for DEI language in job ads specifically, they relied heavily on professional networks and the interview process to assess organizations' overall commitment to DEI. Organizations should consider embedding these principles into multiple job description sections to indicate support of DEI efforts in practical and concrete terms.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Critical librarianship; Information seeking; Information use; Social justice; Sociology of information.

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Diversity; Equity; Inclusion; Job ads; Job search process.

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# INTRODUCTION

The job search process for recent library and information science (LIS) graduates and early career librarians can be long and challenging, as candidates find themselves competing for the same positions, going through the process of locating positions of interest, reviewing job ads, and deciding whether to apply. Within this process, what candidates look for when reviewing job ads drew the researchers' interest, as this specific aspect of the process has not been fully investigated. For this paper, the researchers explored applicants' perceptions of language related to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) found in LIS job ads.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Calls for organizations to include DEI language in job ads have been common across many US industries. Inclusion of this language was purported to support efforts to diversify the workplace by encouraging more candidates from minoritized populations to apply (Williams & Bauer, 1994). This practice was also recommended within LIS, with guidelines for attracting and recruiting minority librarians touting the inclusion of DEI language in job ads as one potential approach (Tureen, 2022). Efforts to determine the impact of including DEI language in job ads have been seen in other industries (Kurtzberg & Ameri, 2024), but no studies have been found within LIS. The aim of this paper is to share findings of soon-to-graduate and early career librarians' perceptions of the DEI language found in LIS job ads and the impact on their job search process. The research question addressed is "How do early career librarians perceive DEI language located in LIS job ads?"

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **The job search process in LIS.**

LIS research rarely reports on the job search process from the applicant's point of view, with a primary focus on documenting LIS hiring practices, predominantly in academic libraries. Houk et al.'s (2024) work acknowledges that academic library hiring practices are bureaucratic and exclusionary, identifying barriers in recruitment, interviewing, and hiring and suggesting inclusionary ways to improve the job search process. Kim et al. (2024) surveyed 242 clinical informatics fellows about their job search and early careers, finding that 42% (n=101) took five months to find a job, starting their search 3-15 months before graduation. The study highlighted the challenges the fellows faced and the value of networking during the job search process. Brisbin et al. (2017) used a round-table survey process to ask seven academic librarians about their job search experiences, with respondents citing challenges with complex job applications, frustration with a long and complicated hiring process, and lack of job security.

## **Reviewing LIS job ads.**

Reviewing job ads is a common research technique in LIS. Recent studies analyzing job ads have focused on skills being required by libraries for specific positions (Brannon et al., 2022; Mu, 2023; Yang et al., 2023), changes in job requirements (Petersen, 2023), the prevalence of specific positions (Crocoll & Hansen, 2024), or position requirements in specific countries (Matsumoto, 2022; Yadav, 2022). Some studies have looked for DEI elements within LIS job ads or looked at the impact of job ads on aspects of DEI. Thompson et al. (2019) applied content analysis to 96 Australian job ads to identify how diversity was reflected, finding most ads were not overtly discriminatory and positive signs of inclusive language, but room for improvement. Dow et al. (2020) investigated the impact of ambiguous and problematic language in a sample of LIS job ads on the employment of those with intellectual disabilities, especially Autism Spectrum Disorder. The authors found several problematic passages with the potential to confuse applicants with and without intellectual disabilities. Smith et al. (2024) investigated the inclusion of cultural competency in archives position postings, finding only 7% of the 499 reviewed jobs included cultural competency as a required or preferred qualification, but a higher percentage included more general DEI language in their position descriptions or qualifications.

## **The impact of including DEI in job ads.**

Recent federal political changes may affect DEI language in job ads (Moore, 2025), but previously, many organizations used such language to signal their values to potential candidates (Kurtzberg & Ameri, 2024). Studies outside LIS have examined DEI language's impact on job seekers, with Heath et al. (2023) finding that EDI statements in UK job ads increased minority applicants' interest. Kurtzberg and Ameri (2024) found that job seekers with disabilities responded more positively to heartfelt DEI language at the top of ads, though disclosure invitations had no effect. While some studies suggest DEI language benefits recruitment, others challenge this notion; Kovacs et al. (2014) found that predominantly White college students perceived diversity statements as unfair, and Hu et al. (2024) found no link between EDI policies in UK job ads and actual racial minority representation in the workforce.

## **METHODS**

This paper reports on findings from a more extensive study to investigate the job search experiences of soon-to-graduate LIS students and early-career librarians. The study utilized eight focus groups and 11 semi-structured interviews to collect data about participants' experience with the job search process, including their approach to the search, what job ad elements attracted them to or deterred them from a position, whether they considered DEI as part of the search process, and participants' suggestions for attracting highly qualified applicants. This study received IRB exemption status from East Carolina University.

## **Participants and sampling.**

Early-career librarians, recent LIS graduates, and soon-to-graduate LIS students in the US and Canada engaged in job searches were recruited through LIS listservs, social media, and email. A screening questionnaire yielded 373 submissions, with 178 valid participants grouped by interest in focus groups or interviews. Invitations were sent to 94 focus group participants and 25 interviewees, resulting in 34 attending focus groups and 11 completing interviews. Sessions were conducted via Teams between June 6–24, recorded, transcribed, anonymized, and verified through member checking. Participants received gift cards (\$25 for focus groups, \$50 for interviews) as incentives.

## **Data analysis.**

A master code list was created based on focus group and interview protocols and the literature. Three rounds of coding were used to analyze the transcripts; an initial round of deductive coding completed by one researcher for the focus groups and another round completed by a second researcher for the interviews. Researchers also inductively introduced additional codes in alignment with the data. The third researcher completed the second round of coding for both focus groups and interviews, noting any disagreements in coding. In the final round of coding, the researchers reviewed disagreements and came to a consensus about which code should apply. Thematic analysis was then applied to the data to identify salient themes.

# **FINDINGS**

The reported findings are based on the overarching theme of “DEI in Job Ads.” Within this theme, three principal axial codes were identified: Lack of trust in DEI statements, Importance of DEI information, and Lack of interest in DEI information.

## **Lack of trust in DEI statements.**

In both focus groups and interviews, some participants indicated they took note of the presence of DEI information and statements found in job ads, but they did not necessarily trust those statements to be true indicators that an organization cared about DEI. A common refrain was that the statements were “boilerplate” and only included due to legal requirements. Keeley felt “a little leery of DEI statements in general because they do just get slapped on the job descriptions, haphazardly, to avoid certain things.” Jordan echoed this sentiment, describing it as “a pretty typical requirement that everyone includes. So, it was nice that it...was there, but...I don’t know how genuine it is because it’s...on every single application.” Marley shared,

I’ve...come to be like a little bit distrustful of...DEI language in the job posting...I feel like there are a lot of institutions that sort of put that in as essentially legalese...I think

the presence of that statement is not necessarily a good indicator of “These are things that the library actually values and is putting into practice.”

Marley added that the statements on their own didn’t “prove anything about that institution’s character, and I need more.” Keeley noted they specifically looked for whether institutions included boilerplate DEI information or if they “wrap[ped] a little more love and care around how they discuss DEI,” with language that had “a bit more meaning or intentionality behind the phrasing.”

For some participants, the distrust of the DEI statements in job ads was expressed dismissively. Blake, who was familiar with the institutions where they were job searching, shared that they “always look for [DEI information] and roll my eyes a bit because...that’s pretty standard for institutes. Typically, the longer they are, the worse the university is at equity.” Eden felt the inclusion of the information was “more political” and that where the information appeared in the job ad would determine whether they addressed it in their cover letter. Cameron took it a step further and indicated they don’t even look for DEI language in job ads because they “feel like we use that as a way to say that we’re doing things to be inclusive, but you’re not really.”

## **Importance of DEI information.**

Even as participants were leery of the truthfulness behind DEI statements and not overly impressed with boilerplate statements, the presence of DEI information in job ads was almost universally noted as important for various reasons. Gale noted that they didn’t always believe the DEI statements they saw in job ads, but “if you don’t have it, that is a red flag...” Noel and Shannon concurred that a lack of DEI information was a “red flag” as it made them question why that information was not included.

Some participants connected the importance of DEI information in the job ad to their own values. As Rowan shared, “I do value those things in an organization whether it does care about hiring...diverse teams and not...giving into systemic racism, systemic oppression.” And Reese indicated that they didn’t “want to work anywhere that does not have a high standard for inclusion...I feel like I do look for...little keywords and things that would hint that this organization is...looking for that type of thing.” For others, the presence of DEI in the job ad impacted their application decision. Morgan shared that “When I see it in a job posting, it makes me feel more comfortable to apply and follow through with the interview, because I know this institution heavily follows those values.” And Greer focused on locating positions where the job ad conveyed that the role included DEI work. Courtney was even more specific, indicating that they used the presence of DEI information,

...as a bit of a qualifier or a litmus test. Social justice in libraries and...DEI initiatives in general are some of my primary interests, and I think that is a good qualifier to help sort out places that I would be a potential fit or be a potential bad fit in.

## **Lack of interest in DEI information.**

For some participants, there was less interest in identifying DEI information in job ads, but interest in DEI within the organization. Remy shared that they “usually wait ‘til I get the interview to look at that stuff...” Cameron shared they did not look for DEI information in job ads because organizations made false statements about the things they do to be inclusive when they weren’t really engaging in those activities. And for River, the lack of interest in DEI information in job ads was related to the region where they were searching and their acknowledgement that recent state-level decisions had marked DEI as something institutions were “not allowed to say anymore.”

Sloan mentioned their knowledge of the places they were interested in applying to as the reason they didn’t look for DEI information in job ads, noting “I kind of know which places to look at, and which ones are very strong with DEI and which ones aren’t.” Similarly, while Aubrey felt that DEI was “very important” to them personally, “in the interest of finding a job, it was not something that I dug super deep into at the time.” Eden only cared about DEI information in a job ad if it meant it was something “they will ask about and you should write about in your cover letter.”

## **DISCUSSION**

Participants generally value DEI language in LIS job ads and consider it important when deciding whether to apply, though they express distrust towards boilerplate statements that don’t seem to reflect an organization’s true DEI values. This aligns with Kurtzberg and Ameri’s (2024) study, which found that heartfelt DEI language was seen as a predictor of how employees would be treated in the workplace, while boilerplate statements were viewed negatively. Given the prevalence of such statements in LIS job ads (Smith et al., 2024) and participants’ fairly negative responses to them, LIS organizations may want to reconsider whether relying solely on boilerplate DEI statements is the best strategy for attracting applicants.

Recent legislative efforts targeting DEI in higher education and hiring practices (EveryLibrary, 2025; Lieb, 2023; Vong et al., 2024) may limit LIS organizations’ ability to include DEI language in job ads. While not all participants in this study sought DEI information, the absence of such information could hinder recruitment efforts, though a study by Hu et al. (2024) suggests that including DEI language in job ads has little impact on increasing racial diversity in the labor force. This indicates that attracting underrepresented applicants requires more than just DEI language in job ads. However, most participants noted that while they look for DEI language, its presence or absence would not deter them from applying, consistent with Heath et al.’s (2023) findings that minority applicants are less likely to apply to positions without DEI language, but it has no impact on majority applicants.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, most participants stressed the importance of organizations upholding DEI principles. However, results indicate that when candidates search for organizations' commitment to DEI principles in job ads, they seldom rely on a DEI statement. Instead, candidates look at sections that include concrete, evidence-based examples of how the organization exhibit DEI principles. Candidates rely heavily on professional networks and the interview process to assess organizations' work culture and overall commitment to DEI. Organizations that view their commitment to DEI as a recruitment tool should consider embedding these principles into multiple job description sections to indicate support of DEI efforts in practical and concrete terms.

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