Mimosa Shah and Dustin Fife

Obstacles and barriers in hiring

Rethinking the process to open doors

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a bimonthly *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the water-cooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. We encourage you to follow and share these conversations about transforming libraries with ideas from the frontlines. This issue's conversation with Mimosa Shah focuses on rethinking hiring processes in academic libraries. When Mimosa and I wrote this article, she was in the middle of seeking a job as a recent LIS graduate.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Mimosa Shah (MS): Dustin, colleges and universities proclaim their commitments to diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion (DEAI), often linking to statements about how their values "translate" into actions. As a recent graduate, a current jobseeker, and a person of color, I look at such statements and feel a sense of relief mingled with curiosity. Are these places truly willing to do what it takes to change? While I take such statements as commitments toward becoming more inclusive and equitable spaces, I also see them as "fronts" for what these institutions do in practice. The recruitment/hiring/retention life cycle for Black, Indigenous, and person of color (BIPOC) job candidates for academic and research libraries is fraught with bureaucracy and layers of communication that deter the very DEAI concepts that they aim to practice. I want to highlight several of these issues, Dustin, and see what you think.

For example, during multiple second-round interviews, I've been asked to name my desired salary range (even though the institution does not make the salaries of other employees in the department available for comparison), engage in conversations on how I plan to "hit the ground running" for residency roles (even though they are presumably for individuals yet to be acquainted with working in academic environments), and share how members of my family have (and have not) engaged in higher education (even though such information shouldn't be relevant to the immediate interview).

So, as someone who is hiring academic library professionals, how do you reconcile the inherent power differences between hiring committees and candidates?

Dustin Fife (DF): Mimosa, thank you for highlighting those telling experiences. That power differential is not by accident. In my experience, every step of the hiring process is

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built to protect institutions and the status quo. Complex job descriptions and application processes impede the newly initiated. Long waiting periods and nebulous timelines leave applicants waiting for weeks, months, and sometimes even a year. Multiple rounds of unsupported labor create unnecessary barriers that the DEAI statements you mentioned earlier claim to be removing. Talk of culture and fit cuts short promising candidacies to protect the comfort of established team members. And far too often, DEAI initiatives create opportunities without any meaningful support. Academic libraries work best for people who understand the unwritten rules of higher education. In short, when the system is exclusively working best for privileged people who look like me, the system is "working as designed." It is maintaining a status quo that will never achieve the aspirational goals of academic libraries.

As someone who helps hire people now, I often think about this problem. There is no one single way to fix the barriers within the hiring process, we must look at every single step from the conception of a position, to hiring, onboarding, and induction. Mimosa, as someone who is seeking a position now, I'd love to hear your impressions of your "first contact" with positions.

MS: I often read job postings for entry-level candidates with requirements that could only have been obtained through previous work experiences or other intensive, often unpaid, volunteer roles. The list of "preferred" qualifications for a job is often as long as the list of "required" qualifications. In addition to a résumé/CV, a cover letter, and reference letters, candidates are sometimes asked to demonstrate their commitment to DEAI through statements listing relevant experiences. These statements veer into performative territory, placing job seekers in an unfair position to not only prove their ability to speak their dialect of DEAI but to also exemplify themselves as a diverse commodity—one that the institution can then use to advertise and attract more such candidates.

You mention that the system is "working as designed" for individuals who are already acquainted with it. Often, the advice will be to "think like a white cis-man," even from well-intentioned BIPOC folks, when it comes to job seeking and salary negotiations. But what if we're imagining a different future? What if we believe the DEAI statements we write that underscore the need for transformation in the LIS profession? While it's taken me some time to love and cherish the person I am, I wouldn't be anything but who I am now: a South Asian American cis woman with her own experiences and perspective. There's something pernicious about asking candidates to explain their views regarding how they might transform an institution, and then using unspoken rules to judge their candidacy. In short, first contact is a quagmire for new library professionals at best and a significant amount of uncompensated labor.

DF: Without a doubt, Mimosa. So many institutions write job descriptions only for library professionals with experience, fueling predatory part-time, adjunct, and volunteer labor practices. For some people, it is the only way they can survive in our profession and eventually meet those lofty qualifications. That is where I begin, I want to remove predatory practices that propagate oppression in our systems. Before I write a particular job description, I think about how we can build a position that is supported financially, structurally, and collegially (for example, making sure they have a meaningful mentor within the library and somewhere else on campus as well).

Recently, my colleagues and I reviewed a job description. Through conversation, we removed most of the preferred qualifications and discussed whether this was a position that

could be someone's first job or if they really needed experience. We did not want it to exist in that ambiguous space where it sounds like a first job but asks for five years of experience. We decided as a team that it needed some experience, but that it could be someone's first opportunity to supervise. We looked at each of the barriers in the job description and decided what would support whomever we hired, not keep out "unqualified" candidates. The job description should not be the gatekeeper, but the mechanism for genuinely informing candidates about expectations. We also worked with HR to narrow the large and unrealistic pay range down to a much more realistic window.

We've only been discussing a small part of this process, but it is clear how fraught applying for jobs is with inequities. The hiring power dynamics by their nature can only be questioned from within the organization, so it is essential that candidates understand what they are experiencing and why. For the candidate, it is the first opportunity to see if the organization is upholding their DEAI statements, or if they are copying and pasting job descriptions that inscribe inequity. As the jobseeker, it is a powerful, though imperfect, case study of things to come. For the hiring team, it is an opportunity to step back and try and see the system.

So, what have you seen in your job seeking that makes you believe that an organization is working to remove barriers versus building new ones?

MS: Aside from posting realistic salary ranges (which I applaud you and your institution for doing!) and paring down job descriptions to focus on essential tasks, here's other things organizations do that lead me to believe they're on the path to change. I love it when they share interview questions in advance. Frankly, it's an accessibility issue because not all candidates will be able to process information immediately, especially if the interview takes place online. It's great when organizations link to mission statements and strategic plans in the job description and are forthcoming about how these translate to tangible actions addressing equity, inclusion, and belonging. I love when they resist the urge to ask about gaps in a candidate's job history and realize that it might have taken a BIPOC candidate many extra systemic hurdles and a lot of ingenuity to get here in relation to peers.

Organizations should be forthcoming about discussing retention strategies for BIPOC colleagues, and before they dive into a question about preferred salary, they should share a sample salary schedule (especially if the institution is private) so that candidates understand what they could potentially negotiate for in an offer. If legally feasible, they should give feedback to successful and unsuccessful candidates. Also, it behooves them to be open about the promotion process for new employees. And finally, LIS schools need to offer better support to launch new careers—and not just training, but access to financial bridge support opportunities and ongoing mentoring.

And perhaps this feels minor, but validating a candidate's parking or transportation fee upfront, offering a stipend for preparing to do a full second-round interview, or advertising potential relocation stipends can ease the burden for individuals who don't have the financial cushion to apply for such opportunities.

DF: Goodness, I hope every hiring manager turns those two paragraphs into a to-do list. Most of these steps do not create extra work while emphasizing the humanity of our colleagues and honoring the labor they are doing to try to join our organizations. In this entire process that we are discussing, that is my number one suggestion to organizations, supervisors, and hiring committees: focus on the humanity of the candidates. Simple things, such as paying for their travel rather than the monstrous rigmarole of reimbursement removes

obstacles and moves toward equity. You see those things better when you are focused on the experiences and humanity of the candidates, rather than what is easiest for the institution. Show them through your processes that their humanity matters and that equity is a priority. The policies and processes within our control are a great place to start.

Thank you, Mimosa, there is so much more I can do in my own organization, and I've learned so much from you. Do you have any final thoughts about removing hiring barriers?

MS: Dustin, so many of us want to do what we've been training to do for years. We're eager to contribute our skills. We want to let our skills shine, and we want to help one another, particularly fellow BIPOC library workers, gain a foothold in this profession. Making the recruitment and hiring process more transparent and humane benefits us all. Welcoming and including new hires also means strategizing with them about their success in the organization, too. Working toward dismantling barriers through clear, concise, and honest job descriptions, as well as campus-wide training on inclusive hiring strategies for committee members, can go a long way. But ultimately, it's about power: how much are we willing to cede to guarantee the flourishing and thriving of these library workers? ✍