

Hiring in Academic Libraries: A Thematic Review of the Literature

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Abstract

Hiring practices in academic libraries play a significant role in shaping access to the profession. While progress has been made, literature reveals ongoing tensions between commitments to equity and the structures that govern recruitment and evaluation. This review synthesizes scholarship on academic librarian hiring, with attention to how experience requirements and evaluative norms can affect early-career, non-traditional, and underrepresented candidates. Across the literature, prior academic library experience emerges as the strongest predictor of job attainment, even for entry-level positions. Research expectations at the point of hire, particularly for tenure-track positions, can disadvantage candidates without early access to scholarly opportunities. Studies also highlight the emotional labor brought on by the academic job search, as well as the role of subjective criteria such as “fit,” in reinforcing barriers to hiring. Collectively, this body of research points to a tendency in hiring practices to prioritize familiarity with academic norms and institutional culture over transferable skills and potential for growth. This review argues that academic libraries should continue working toward more transparent and intentional hiring practices that reflect the profession’s commitment to equity. The literature base for this review was compiled in collaboration with a colleague, and the author acknowledges the absence of an independently conducted search protocol as a limitation.

Keywords: Academic libraries, hiring practices, equity in hiring, academic librarianship, experience requirements, entry-level librarians, emotional labor

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

When I interviewed for my current position, it was my first encounter with academic hiring. I quickly noticed my unfamiliarity with academic culture, faculty expectations, and scholarly language—and realized that starting a career in academic librarianship would feel like reading a book with the first few chapters missing. My background was mostly in non-library work, with a brief time in a public-facing library role. I was a non-traditional student and came into academic librarianship without prior academic library

experience or the preprofessional work history that many job postings may assume. Although I secured a position soon after completing my MLIS degree, the process of job-seeking was marked by uncertainty, self-doubt, and a sense of disconnect between my professional experience, personal background, and what I believed an “ideal” academic librarian candidate should be. These feelings were not unique, nor were they simply my own personal insecurities. Navigating the interview process and my first year in an academic library sparked an interest in the hiring process of this field, particularly research that examines who is considered

qualified, how readiness is assessed, and which candidates are advantaged or left out.

This literature review synthesizes scholarship on academic librarian hiring, with attention to early-career, non-traditional, and underrepresented candidates. For this review, the term “non-traditional” refers to candidates who came to academic librarianship from outside the field, without prior academic library experience, or via career paths that differ from the linear, academically oriented routes that hiring norms tend to favor. Rather than offering job search advice, this review focuses on how hiring structures, expectations, and evaluative norms shape access to academic librarianship and contribute to ongoing inequities.

The author acknowledges a limitation of this review: the literature base was compiled by a colleague, with additional sources suggested by anonymous peer reviewers, rather than through an independently conducted systematic search. While this provided a broad foundation, it means the review cannot claim to be comprehensive or fully reproducible. Future work in this area would benefit from a documented search protocol.

Experience, Preparedness, and the “Ideal Candidate”

A consistent theme in the literature is the central role of prior academic library experience in determining hiring outcomes, even for entry-level positions. Cunningham and Ruffin (2015) identify a disconnect between library and information science (LIS) education and employer expectations, finding that candidates with professional experience are more likely to secure academic library positions than those whose preparation consisted primarily of their studies. This creates a circular barrier in which experience is required to get experience, limiting access for new graduates and those coming from other areas of librarianship.

Empirical studies reinforce this pattern. Eckard et al. (2014) and Reed et al. (2015) found that prior academic library work, professional engagement, and early application timing were the strongest

predictors of job search success, while GPA, coursework, and technical skills played a minor role. Additional studies echo these findings, showing that pre-professional academic library employment, internships, and early entry into the academic job market are associated with successful outcomes (Iglesias et al., 2023; Iglesias, Mahama, & Gard, 2024).

Conversely, experience gained in public, school, or special libraries may be seen as less relevant or even detrimental when pursuing academic positions. Iglesias et al. (2023) and Iglesias, Mahama, and Gard (2024) both find negative associations between non-academic library experience and academic job attainment, suggesting that academic librarianship is often treated as a separate and restricted career track. This dynamic gives advantage to linear, academically oriented backgrounds and marginalizes candidates with transferable skills that were developed elsewhere.

Research Expectations and the Early-Career and Non-traditional Candidates

Closely tied to experience expectations is the assumption that candidates for tenure-track academic librarian positions already have a defined research agenda at the time of hire. While some literature does not explicitly highlight this expectation, Eckard et al. (2014) argue that it is embedded in hiring criteria that reward prior publishing, conference participation, and research activity.

For early-career and non-traditional candidates, this expectation may function as a barrier rather than a measure of potential. Candidates who have not yet had the opportunity to engage in research-intensive roles may be evaluated against standards more appropriate for mid-career scholars. This assumption[JS1.1][AB1.2] risks mistaking prior access to opportunity for innate ability, especially when institutional support for research development varies widely (Cunningham & Ruffin, 2015).

Allowing space for research agendas to develop after hire—when they can be shaped by

institutional priorities, mentoring, and professional growth—may broaden access to academic librarianship while still meeting faculty research and organizational needs. However, this possibility remains underexplored in the literature and would benefit from further attention.

Emotional Labor and the Job Search Experience

The academic library job search imposes significant emotional labor on candidates. Burns and Fargo (2019) identify anxiety, stress, frustration, and exhaustion as defining features of early-career librarians' experiences. Their findings highlight the tension between optimistic narratives promoted by LIS programs and professional organizations and the realities of a competitive and uncertain job market.

Candidate-focused studies of the interview process further illustrate these emotional demands. Houk and Nielsen (2023a) document how on-site interviews can be the most stressful aspects of the process, particularly unstructured social components such as mealtimes. Candidates reported feeling pressure to perform professionalism, confidence, and cultural fluency, even when those expectations are not clearly stated. Arch and Gilman (2021) similarly argue that informal and social elements of interviews give advantages to candidates familiar with dominant cultural norms and disadvantage those from underrepresented backgrounds. Rather than assessing job-related competencies, these interactions often reward candidates who can perform expected academic identities.

This literature suggests that hiring processes evaluate not only technical competence, but also emotional regulation and social performance. For candidates unfamiliar with academic norms or faculty culture, this emotional burden may be especially pronounced.

Hiring Practices, Structural Barriers, and “Fit”

A growing body of research critiques the hiring practices themselves, particularly reliance on subjective criteria such as “fit.” In the context of academic library hiring, “fit” is often used by search committees to describe how well a candidate aligns with the perceived culture, values, or norms of an organization, yet it is rarely defined in job postings or evaluation rubrics. Gasper and Brown (2015) examined how one hiring group revised their hiring practice to better evaluate fit, arguing that hiring for fit does not necessarily hinder diversity. Cunningham et al. (2019), however, observe that organizational fit “allows for libraries to stay within their comfort zones and replicate the status quo” (p. 17), favoring candidates whose identities and professional background align with the dominant institutional norms.

Research on hiring committees echoes these concerns. Houk and Nielsen (2023b) find that a lack of intentionality in interview design and evaluation allows undefined notions of fit to introduce bias and inconsistency. Lopez (2022) further critiques recruitment practices that assume candidates' familiarity with academic culture and frames these assumptions as signs of broader institutional dysfunction.

Barriers also emerge earlier in the process, through job postings and application requirements. Hernandez (2023) writes that vague qualifications, extensive documentation requirements, and lack of salary transparency discourage candidates from applying, and disproportionately affect BIPOC applicants. These decisions shape applicant pools before interviews even occur. Manwiller et al. (2024) extend this analysis through a Universal Design framework, arguing that job postings can themselves function as barriers for candidates with disabilities when they include unnecessary qualifications, difficult-to-navigate formatting, or omit critical information such as salary ranges, benefits, and health care options. Together, these bodies of work suggest that decisions made at the earliest stages of the hiring process can shape who feels welcome to apply.

Inequities in Access, Identity, and Career Pathways

Several studies examine how identity and access influence hiring outcomes. Iglesias and Gard (2023) identify gender-based differences in job attainment timelines, with cisgender men obtaining academic librarian positions more quickly than cisgender women. While the authors note the need for further research, these findings align with broader literature on gendered leadership norms within librarianship. Despite librarianship being a field predominantly composed of women, women are not proportionally represented in leadership positions (Olin & Millet, 2015). This suggests that gender-based hiring advantages may affect not only who is hired, but how quickly and at what level candidates enter academic library careers.

Iglesias et al. (2024) and Cunningham and Ruffin (2015) show that academic librarianship is not equally accessible from all professional backgrounds. Candidates who begin their careers outside academic libraries may face compounded disadvantages, even when they have relevant and transferable skills and experience (Iglesias et al., 2023). This reinforces the perception of academic librarianship as a closed system rather than a profession open to newcomers.

Research extends these concerns to other marginalized populations. Adolpho et al. (2024) explore the experiences of trans and gender diverse people navigating library hiring, identifying barriers related to disclosure, identity documentation, and hostile workplace cultures. Betz (2022) and Manwiller et al. (2024) document the challenges faced by candidates with disabilities, including inaccessible application processes, lack of accommodation transparency, and bias during interviews. Together, these studies show that barriers to academic library hiring are not uniform and are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities and circumstances.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional disruptions to academic library hiring, including

hiring freezes, shifts to virtual interview formats, and increased uncertainty for early-career candidates (Quinn, 2023; Fletcher et al., 2025). While some of these changes may have reduced barriers—such as reducing costs associated with in-person interviews by introducing hybrid or virtual interviews—others created new forms of inequity, such as disadvantaging candidates without reliable access to technology. Additionally, the pandemic appeared to strengthen the tendency to hire candidates with already-established ties to the local region (Quinn, 2023).

Conclusion

The literature on hiring in academic libraries reveals a profession shaped by limited definitions of experience, preparedness, and professional legitimacy. While individual candidates may succeed despite these constraints, the cumulative effect of current hiring practices favors those with early access to academic environments, institutional knowledge, and professional networks. Addressing these issues requires academic libraries to re-examine and they recruit, evaluate, and develop new faculty.

For early-career and non-traditional candidates, expectations surrounding experience, research readiness, and cultural fit may function as barriers rather than indicators of potential or transferable skills. Greater transparency and intentionality in hiring practices could expand access to academic librarianship while strengthening the profession by adding new perspectives to the candidate pool. Kung et al. (2020) offer a starting point, with actionable recommendations that include clarifying program goals, building in ways to assess program success, diversifying recruitment plans, and creating pathways for mid- to late-career librarians. Incorporating these frameworks into practice could be a meaningful step toward aligning hiring processes with professional commitments to equity and inclusion.

Future research could examine how hiring expectations are constructed within academic

libraries. Empirical work is particularly needed on research expectations at the point of hire for tenure-track librarians. While prior studies document the importance of experience and professional engagement, few examine how research productivity is evaluated for early-career candidates or how search committees distinguish between demonstrated potential and prior access to opportunity. Comparative studies across institutions could reveal how variations in mentoring, workload allocation, and research support shape both hiring decisions and long-term success.

Additionally, mixed-methods research could help clarify how hiring practices influence retention, professional development, and career paths over time. Following early-career librarians, especially those that are non-traditional, from application through post-hire development could help determine whether current hiring criteria accurately predict job performance, research engagement, or institutional fit. Practitioner-led research that centers the perspectives of candidates and search committee members from marginalized backgrounds could support the development of more equitable and transparent hiring models. This work would extend the existing literature and provide actionable recommendations for academic libraries to better align recruitment practices with their commitments to equity and inclusion.

Despite the barriers outlined in this review, the literature also reflects meaningful progress toward more inclusive hiring practices in academic libraries, evidenced in part by the fact that this body of literature now exists. Efforts to standardize job postings, increase salary transparency, and develop structured interview protocols are concrete steps toward reducing the influence of subjective evaluation like “fit” (Hernandez, 2023; Houk & Nielson, 2023b). Broader professional conversations about equity and diversity in librarianship, reflected in initiatives from the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries, have contributed to growing awareness of how hiring practices shape the profession. Understanding this path matters:

recognizing where progress has been made, and under what conditions that progress occurred, can inform how future changes are designed for lasting impact.

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