



ONE OF US: Social Performance in Academic Library Hiring

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, there has been increasing discussion of the lack of diversity within the academic library workforce, and focus on the systems and structural biases that have helped perpetuate cultural and racial whiteness in libraries. This has led to an examination of library hiring practices and the ways in which, in the search of the ‘perfect’ colleague, hiring managers and search committees use processes designed to evaluate a candidate’s ‘fit’. This approach ultimately works against the creation of a diverse workplace by searching for and finding candidates who best reproduce the library’s existing culture.

In response, some libraries have begun to make changes to certain aspects of their hiring processes in order to ostensibly move away from ‘fit’ and to make them more inclusive, such as limiting minimum required qualifications, recruiting through venues that will reach underrepresented groups, and creating evaluative rubrics. However, certain elements of the interview process which can place candidates at a disadvantage if their identities, backgrounds, and experiences don’t conform to the library’s cultural status quo often appear to be left unexamined. These are the social aspects of an interview—activities designed to get a sense of a candidate’s soft skills, such as communication and social skills, in both formal and informal settings. This may include meals, such as dinner before or after the interview, meet and greets designed to allow the candidate to meet more of their potential colleagues, and even presentations or job talks where the candidate must display their aptitude for public speaking, whether or not this is part of their proposed role in the workplace. While these events are often highly valued by faculty and staff in the hiring library, the degree to which they are critical for understanding a candidate’s potential performance in a work environment is questionable, and there is little guidance on how to evaluate social elements and to minimize the risk of bias inherent in these more free-form parts of an interview.

The authors’ own experiences and libraries are not exempt from this lack of examination and, in fact, we exemplify the problem. As white, cisheterosexual, able bodied library administrators and hiring managers, we have both benefited from and employed hiring practices that incorporate these social elements. Given our own comfort with these processes due to our identities, it was not until we participated in a search advocate program and subsequently explored anti-bias hiring practices at our institutions, that we came to recognize the barriers that these elements present and the extent to which they can create candidate discomfort and introduce bias into the hiring process.

In order to further discussion of, and encourage others to challenge, the role of social performance elements in academic library hiring, this paper examines the value placed

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on specific social elements (meals and public presentations) by hiring managers, the ways they are typically included in evaluating candidates, and the specific bias risks they pose. In response, we propose several potential strategies for mitigating this risk, even in the cases where hiring managers still wish to maintain social elements within the interview.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unstructured and Structured Interviews

Social performance elements like meals, ‘meet-and-greets,’ and even some aspects of public presentations, in library hiring processes are largely *unstructured*: they provide a high “degree of discretion”¹ for search committee or other community members to pursue topics or lines of questioning with candidates that may or may not be directly relevant to the requirements of a position, and can also provide opportunities for evaluative feedback unrelated to required qualifications to be collected from session participants.

In considering the risk of bias and discrimination that these unstructured, social performance elements introduce into the hiring process, the substantial literature on hiring and interview approaches provides useful context. Decades ago, unstructured interviews were identified both as allowing interviewers to “[ask] non-job related questions [and] make subjective interpretations based on non-job related variables” and as being less reliable forms of assessing candidates.² These findings have persisted over time, with more recent empirical research demonstrating that unstructured interviewing can “harm accuracy”³ of candidate evaluation and “results in worse personnel selection decisions.”⁴

The reason that unstructured interviews lead to such unreliable hiring decisions has also been explored. While candidate evaluation should ideally be based on the candidate’s ability to perform in the position, as noted above, unstructured interviewing allows irrelevant (often personal) information about candidates to become the focus and can bias interviewers and others involved in a search. There is “reason to believe that unstructured interviews can harm judgment and reason to doubt that interviewers will be sufficiently adept at spotting [useful] information, and not false alarms, about a candidate.”⁵ This finding is supported by a meta-analysis of hiring research that concluded that interviewer bias had a more significant impact on unstructured interview scores than on structured interview scores.⁶ The ever-growing consensus about the problematic nature of unstructured interviewing was captured in a 2016 *Harvard Business Review* article: “the evidence against unstructured interviews should make any hiring manager pause. These interviews should not be your evaluation tool of choice; they are fraught with bias and irrelevant information.”⁷

In contrast to unstructured interviews, *structured* interviews provide less discretion for interviewers or others involved in the search process, and help ensure both that all candidates are treated equally and that the interview process focuses on job-related skills, experience, and topics. The use of structure not only helps control for the personal bias of individual interviewers that could enter into candidate evaluation, but also helps address structural bias present in an organization (often expressed through a desire for candidates to be a “good fit” with organizational culture—to align with norms that don’t have anything to do with a candidate’s ability to do the job, and that “exclude or disadvantage” candidates who don’t appear to “fit”⁸). By intentionally structuring and standardizing what questions are asked, how candidate responses are evaluated,⁹ and how candidate feedback is gathered, implicit biases and assumptions can be identified and addressed and “idiosyncratic weighting of information and outright personal preferences toward applicants”¹⁰ eliminated or substantially mitigated.

While the primary application of a structured approach in the hiring process has been to the actual interview (i.e. the formal questioning by a single interviewer or by an interview panel), it has also been suggested that structure can, and should, be applied to less formal elements of the interview experience (i.e. the complete time that a candidate is on-site). This is seen specifically in psychology literature from the past decade, which has examined the role of *rappport building* in interviews. As defined by Levashina et al., *rappport building* “occurs prior to an interview and includes ‘small talk’ or casual conversation that is initiated by the interviewer in order to put applicants at ease.”¹¹ These informal interactions, during which the interviewer(s) (or other community members spending time with a candidate) has discretion about what topics to introduce, and is likely to ask

more personal questions in an attempt to put a candidate at ease or get to know them better, present the same bias risks as unstructured interviews themselves.¹² Recognizing that eliminating rapport building from the hiring process altogether may be impractical, it has been suggested that structure should be applied to “casual” interactions like this, such as using standard questions for all candidates,¹³ or requiring that “interviewers follow a ‘structured’ script during rapport building, participate in rapport-building training, and even score rapport-building responses by focusing on competencies related to rapport building as well as later job success.”¹⁴

Unstructured Elements in Academic (Library) Hiring

Candidate Meals. Despite the prevalence of literature on the bias risks and limited efficacy of unstructured interviews, and suggestions that if informal elements of hiring like rapport building are retained, they would also benefit from intentional structure, hiring processes in academia (including academic libraries) continue to incorporate unstructured, informal elements as part of interviewing. This is especially true of candidate meals, which are common parts of often day-long interview processes for faculty or librarian positions.

Over the past decade, trade publications in higher education have scrutinized the role of meals in academic hiring—not to question their role in the hiring process, but to provide advice to candidates about how to not “feel ashamed or out of place”¹⁵ when dining with search committees or potential colleagues. This advice has recognized, both implicitly and explicitly, that candidate meals are part of the hiring process, and that candidates should be prepared to be evaluated on their dining and social performance—for example, they are advised to “be especially aware of how questions that cannot be asked during a formal interview might be worked into more casual conversations.”¹⁶ It has also been noted that meals present unique bias risks due to the “unwritten social codes [of dining]: signifiers of status, indexes of health, identity markers, taboos”¹⁷—all of which can cause candidates discomfort and can also be used, even unconsciously, to evaluate a candidate’s fit with an institution’s culture. But despite this, meals are consistently presented as an accepted part of academic hiring. It is notable that even in educational literature that interrogates the cultural bias in academic hiring, meals are not challenged as a problematic element of the interview process; rather, “less formalized parts of the day” are suggested as “opportunities [for search committees] to communicate [their] diversity literacy” by doing things like asking candidates about dietary restrictions they may have.¹⁸

Academic library hiring processes are no different with regard to approaching candidate meals as common and expected. Especially for library faculty and academic professional positions, lunches and dinners appear to be standard parts of search protocol¹⁹ (see, for example, library search guidelines from University of Illinois²⁰ and Penn State University²¹ libraries), and library literature includes advice to candidates similar to that noted above: “if breakfast, lunch, or dinner is part of the schedule of activities with someone from the potential office, it is part of the formal interview, no matter how informal it may feel.”²² The advice from another author is even more direct: “You are always interviewing. Your behavior during the meal gives the hiring committee an indication of how you interact socially with others. [...] Remember you are being evaluated not only on your qualifications but also to see if you would be a good fit in the library’s culture.”²³

Candidate Presentations. While the candidate meal is easily identified as an unstructured interview element that introduces bias risks, candidate presentations can introduce similar risks. Although more structured than a meal, and theoretically more closely tied to evaluating candidate knowledge relevant to position requirements, the social performance required in a presentation and the likelihood that community members will be providing unstructured feedback on candidates creates potential issues for equitable candidate evaluation. Similar to faculty hiring processes, presentations are a relatively common requirement for librarian positions;²⁴ a survey of public and academic libraries found that 55% required a presentation for entry-level positions,²⁵ and the Association of College and Research Libraries notes that “candidates may be expected to deliver a presentation”²⁶ as part of the interview day. The use of presentations persists although some librarians have questioned their utility, noting for example that “canned presentations [reveal] little about the candidates themselves,”²⁷ and—with regard to staged information literacy sessions—“Mock teaching is asking librarians to step into the role of actor, and, frankly, not everyone is an actor or adept as one. [...] Credible and genuine teaching does not necessarily demand a stage presence; but a formulaic, contrived teaching scenario does.”²⁸

When paired with these criticisms highlighting the problematic “performative nature”²⁹ of candidate presentations, the issue of who is evaluating candidates (and how) based on these social performances becomes even more relevant. Presentations are often open for anyone in the library or university community to attend,³⁰ and this creates an opportunity for non-search committee members to ask candidates questions that may or may not pertain to the presentation.³¹ Apart from the substance of questions, even the act of questioning can introduce bias: academic hiring research in the field of engineering has shown that women candidates’ presentations are more frequently interrupted or dominated by audience questions and comments than are men’s, resulting in an unequal opportunity for candidates to share their expertise.³² In addition to any bias present in audience exchanges with candidates, having all attendees submit post-presentation evaluations of a candidate can also create issues. A survey of library directors in the Southeastern United States found that, in general, there is inconsistency in the use of rubrics for candidate assessment,³³ and the earlier-cited survey of public and academic library hiring found that only 30% of respondents used an “evaluation tool to make evaluating presentations less subjective.”³⁴ This lack of standardized evaluation can become problematic when general attendees to a candidate presentation submit feedback: it has been noted that when general participants in a search process provide comments, they “may not focus on the criteria [the committee believes] are most important [and] they may not understand the risks and remedies for unintentional bias.”³⁵

Understanding the Rationale for Social Performance Elements

From an examination of academic library hiring literature, it appears that unstructured interview elements like meals, and to a lesser extent public presentations, serve one primary purpose: evaluating a candidate’s potential fit within a library’s community and culture. The predominance of fit in library hiring in general has been explicit for years: a 2010 survey of academic library hiring committees found that fit was deemed more important than demonstrated abilities related to the position requirements by search committee representatives.³⁶ This preference has continued to be borne out in later examinations of library hiring; for example, one case study’s authors went as far as to state that “traditional library search and interview processes *do not do enough* [emphasis added] to determine which candidates will be able to work productively within a specific work culture.”³⁷

This focus on cultural fit has been increasingly questioned in recent years,³⁸ due to the way searching for fit only serves to reinforce and reproduce the cultural and racial whiteness of libraries.³⁹ In response, both individual academic libraries and library professional associations have created guidance for approaching hiring with an equity, diversity, and inclusion lens. While some guidance explicitly addresses fit (for example, advising hiring committees to understand “how person-org fit [...] can be problematic” and there is a need “for ‘extending fit’”⁴⁰), it is notable that there is no specific mention of the rationale for continuing to include social performance elements (i.e. meals and presentations)—even in national association guidance from the American Library Association⁴¹ and Canadian Association of Research Libraries⁴² that focus on diversity in hiring.

In response to this lack of attention to the specific bias risks posed by social performance elements in academic library hiring, and to inform strategies for creating more equitable hiring practices, we conducted a small pilot study to explore the following questions:

- What value do academic library leaders believe that both informal (i.e. meals) and formal (i.e. presentations) social elements provide in the hiring process?
- How is information gathered through informal and formal social elements incorporated into the evaluation of candidates?

METHODS

We developed a brief survey aimed at academic library deans and directors, as the individuals most often responsible for shaping hiring processes for their libraries. The survey requested basic institutional characteristics, and asked respondents to indicate which social elements they included in their hiring processes; the value that they associated specifically with informal social elements (i.e. coffees, meals); the value that they associated with public presentations by candidates; the ways in which these elements were included in candidate evaluation; and

the ways in which these elements were being incorporated in online-only interview processes. For the purposes of the survey, we defined “social elements” as “any activity that is designed to get a sense of a candidate’s soft skills, such as communication and social skills, in both formal and informal settings.” Questions about the value and use of the different elements were constructed as multiple choice items (allowing for multiple selections), and allowed respondents to enter free-text responses if none of the choices provided fit their experience. Choice options were informed by the ways in which the literature most commonly indicated social elements were valued and used in candidate evaluation.

For the purposes of this initial exploratory study, we used a convenience sample composed of our existing professional communities of academic library leaders—the group of deans and directors in our regional library consortium (Orbis Cascade Alliance) and participants in the College Library Director Mentoring Program. Following review and approval by our institutional IRBs, we distributed the survey to the respective email lists for both communities, using Qualtrics as the collection tool. Survey responses did not collect individual or institutional names from respondents, or any other combination of information that would allow an individual respondent to be identified among the group of potential respondents. Free-text responses were categorized using open coding to identify common themes in responses.

RESULTS

We received a total of 61 responses (out of 317 possible respondents across both mailing lists). Respondents were primarily from baccalaureate (24) and master’s-granting (24) institutions, with a smaller number from associate’s (4) and doctoral (9) universities. The survey began by asking what types of social elements were usually included in library interview processes, whether or not they are included in hiring for all position types. The most prevalent elements were lunch (53 respondents) and presentations (54), however dinners (39) and coffee breaks (40) were also common. The least common social element was breakfast, with only 18 respondents reporting that they include breakfast in interviews. Those who selected “other” primarily contributed information about regular non-social interview meetings or campus tours.

Next, the survey focused on informal social elements (meals and coffees were provided as examples), and how library leaders feel that they contribute to the interview process. Respondents were invited to choose as many value statements as they felt applied. The options and number of responses were:

- Makes the candidate feel welcome (53)
- Opportunity to evaluate how the candidate performs in a social setting (29)
- Gives more potential colleagues a chance to meet the candidate (52)
- Opportunity to see how the candidate will work with others in the institution (32)
- Not applicable—we don’t use informal social elements in our interviews (3)
- Other (please describe) (17)

These responses indicate a belief that the greatest value of these elements is less explicitly evaluative and more focused on rapport-building and helping the candidate feel welcome. However, a significant number of respondents did select that informal social elements are a time to evaluate the candidate’s social skills and potential compatibility with colleagues. Only three respondents chose ‘Not applicable’, showing that the vast majority of respondents both use and value informal social elements in the interview process.

The responses to “Other” primarily elaborated on the existing choices, rather than introducing additional value themes (for example, 9 of the 17 comments focused on benefit to the candidate). The most common additional value expressed for meals in an interview process was as a reward, either for the candidate or for the search committee. In the words of one respondent, “The value used to be a free lunch or snacks to encourage staff to participate if they wouldn’t participate without food.” Another stated that the purpose is to “give a little back to the candidate after asking them to spend a good chunk of their day with us.” Several of these responses also brought the idea of testing for fit to the forefront. For example, one respondent stated that meals are valuable because they “may also encourage the candidates to be more ‘revealing’ of themselves. Sometimes they come prepared for the formal parts, but reveal their ‘truer’ selves in the informal settings.” Even more explicitly, another respondent wrote that:

“For faculty hires, I usually have one meal alone with the candidate (I’m the Director) the evening before the day-long interview so I can get to know the individual in a casual setting. I take them someplace informal and simply chat with them for a few hours in an effort to put them at ease before they have to run the gauntlet the next day, and also to ascertain whether I think their personality will fit into the culture I am trying to curate for our library.”

Respondents were next asked how the informal social elements were incorporated into candidate evaluation. The options and responses were:

- Participants/attendees have an opportunity to submit candidate feedback (40)
- Search committee members attend/participate (43)
- Not applicable—we don’t consider social elements in candidate evaluation (6)
- Not applicable—we don’t use social elements in our interviews (3)
- Other (please describe) (9)

The results indicate that most respondents provide the opportunity for participants in meals or coffees to submit candidate feedback, and that in most cases, search committee members are invited to participate in these social events, giving them direct knowledge of candidate behavior in these venues.

The “Other” responses to this question provided explicit statements of the importance of fit within the interview process. One respondent wrote “It is more informal than recorded feedback, but more of a, ‘I think I could work with them,’ while another commented “We use the feedback from the informal social contacts to help determine the ‘fit’ of the candidate with the library team.”

Following the questions regarding informal social elements like meals and coffees, respondents were also asked about the value and evaluative role of public presentations by candidates, a more formal element of an interview but nevertheless one that requires significant social performance from a candidate. The options for the value that library leaders find in public presentations, along with the number of responses, were:

- Opportunity to evaluate how the candidate communicates in a public forum (52)
- Opportunity for the candidate to demonstrate expertise relevant to the position (57)
- Gives more potential colleagues a chance to meet the candidate (46)
- Not applicable—we don’t use presentations in our interviews (3)
- Other (please describe) (10)

The high number of selections of each statement indicate that respondents felt that the value statements were mostly all relevant. Those who chose “Other” commonly (in 7 out of 10 responses) stated that presentations were most important in positions with teaching responsibilities; for example “Librarians will be teaching students. We ask them to prepare a session relating to their choice of topic in information literacy for an undergraduate audience.” In a few cases, the respondent expressed a value for the presentation beyond public speaking or expertise, for example: “Presentations give us the chance to see whether a candidate can observe guidelines (e.g. does a candidate spend far more (or less) time on a presentation?). This might indicate long-windedness or inability to clearly and appropriately articulate a vision. The Q&A session is invaluable for observing comfort with the unexpected.”

As with informal social elements, respondents were asked how they incorporate presentations into candidate evaluation, with the following options and response numbers:

- Participants/attendees have an opportunity to submit candidate feedback (53)
- Search committee uses to evaluate required or preferred knowledge (50)
- Not applicable—we don’t have candidates give presentations (3)
- Other (please describe) (3)

Even more clearly than with informal social elements, presentations are used to help evaluate candidates. The few “Other” responses referred back to the value of these presentations (rather than their role in candidate evaluation), with one respondent providing a new value for the presentation, as an opportunity for professional development for staff: “Staff learns and asks questions later informed by what they saw at the presentations sometimes.”

The final survey question acknowledged that many usual interview practices may not have been possible in the year of primarily remote work during the pandemic. Recognizing that interview processes may change

significantly after what was experienced over the past year, survey respondents were asked to comment on whether they anticipated trying to replicate (or already had) social elements in online interview formats. While many said that they had not been able to hire during COVID, those who had conducted searches were split as to whether they had included informal elements like meals: 8 respondents indicated that they had, or were planning to, replicate informal “meet-and-greets” or “coffee breaks” over Zoom and 8 respondents indicated that they were intentionally not replicating social elements in their online interview processes. This proportionately small number of institutions choosing to create an informal social element raises more doubt about how essential such elements actually are for an effective hiring process. Approximately the same number of respondents commented that they had continued to incorporate presentations into online interviews, though the language around presentations online was more positive.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While derived from a limited sample, the survey results provide support for the themes present in the literature regarding the perceived value and role of informal and formal social performance elements in academic library hiring: both informal social elements and formal public presentations are common parts of library hiring processes; these elements (especially informal ones like meals) are often valued for reasons *other* than determining the ability of a candidate to do the job; and they are frequently incorporated into evaluating candidates, often by providing non-search committee members opportunities to submit feedback on candidates.

Respondents’ free-text comments especially reinforced the idea present in the literature and library hiring guidance that social elements remain an unquestioned necessity in library hiring: a clear majority of comments across all questions sought (even when not prompted by the specific question) to elaborate on the specific value of social elements. In contrast, while not specifically prompted to comment on potential drawbacks to these elements, only one free-text response spoke explicitly about the risk of incorporating feedback from social elements into candidate evaluation: “After candidate visits, a survey [is sent] asking specifically whether people think the candidate will be successful re: the requirements of the position. We forbid the word or concept of “fit” and disregard any comments that are along those lines, focusing instead on the candidate’s demonstrated ability to do the requirements of the position.” While impossible to extrapolate given the size of the sample and nature of questions asked, the fact that this type of response was an anomaly alongside multiple value statements for social elements would appear to indicate that the bias risks present in these practices may not be readily apparent to some library leaders.

To begin to address this potential gap in awareness, and the accompanying bias risks it creates in library hiring processes, we have formulated an initial set of recommendations regarding social performance elements for libraries seeking to mitigate bias in their interview processes. These recommendations were informed both by the literature supporting the use of structure in interview processes, as well as the search advocate training⁴³ that we completed.

Educate

The first and most basic step to take is to educate all individuals participating in any interview elements about the potential for bias in the hiring process. Many institutions now provide implicit bias training for search committees, but we recommend that *everyone* participating in the interview process receive implicit bias training, not just the search committee. Anyone who will be attending candidate meetings and subsequently submitting feedback on the candidate should understand the bias risks inherent in evaluating candidates’ interview performance and the ways in which to frame feedback to focus only on items relevant to required job duties.

To this end, training should specifically help participants understand the potential for bias in the unstructured parts of the interview day. For example, anyone participating in a meal with a candidate should understand that these social elements may lead to impressions of a candidate that are unrelated to job qualifications. It should be noted that while education about implicit bias for all interview participants is recommended as means of reducing the potential for feedback on culture fit or other aspects of a candidate’s identity or character

unrelated to the position, the nature of that education will likely need to vary across participants. In the case of public presentations, where attendance may be open to people internal and external to the library, it may not be practical to provide implicit bias training for all attendees. But brief educational materials could be provided to all participants beforehand (especially if registration is required to attend), and/or the search committee chair could provide brief remarks prior to a presentation about the requirements of the position and the specific type of feedback that is being sought.

Although an understanding of implicit bias and the potential risks of unstructured interview elements is critical, education for participants alone will likely not be sufficient to mitigate bias in the majority of interviews. However, it may be the most viable option when the job duties include regular social performance, and therefore the interview needs to include evaluation of social performance elements. For example, with regard to informal social performance, senior library administrators or development officers may routinely need to participate in social events and work-related meals. And with regard to formal public presentations, instructional librarians are a commonly cited example of a position type that will be required to present and teach regularly. In such cases, evaluating candidates' skills in these areas may be appropriate. If so, attempts should be made to educate every attendee, not just search committee members, on how to evaluate these elements objectively and with specific attention to job requirements.

Structure

Ideally, libraries will not only provide training for those involved in these social elements, they will also add structure to these unstructured times as a necessary complement to implicit bias education. The antithesis of this, specifically with regard to informal social elements, was described by one of the survey respondents: "We take candidates out for coffee or beers, their choice. Search team members attend. No explicit rubrics are created for these elements; search team members incorporate their thoughts into the overall debrief for the finalist round of interviews."

This response illustrates the limitations of education alone in mitigating potential bias in candidate evaluation. Even if search committee members are aware of the need to avoid commenting on cultural fit as opposed to alignment with position requirements, a lack of structure to guide both their time with the candidate and their evaluation of the candidate based on that time can create opportunities for inappropriate topics or biased comments to be introduced into candidate assessment.

The suggestions in the literature for incorporating structure into interview rapport building sessions⁴⁴ are instructive for libraries: providing structure for informal times by prescribing allowable topics/lines of questioning and creating rubrics that focus evaluation of candidates' performance during this time on job qualifications only. In the former case, for example, a hiring manager could provide a list of allowable topics about which meal attendees could converse with a candidate. Or, in the latter case, the search committee could provide evaluative criteria for the social element to anyone participating, with a clear connection to the required skills in the job description, rather than requesting open-ended impressions of the candidate. For example, if the job qualifications included a requirement of excellent oral communication skills, participants in meals and presentations could be instructed to pay specific attention to those skills during these social elements. Ideally, participants would also be provided with an evaluative rubric in advance so that they all had a consistent idea of the criteria upon which this requirement should be assessed and could submit subsequent evaluations based on those criteria. A similar type of structure could be provided for participation in the unstructured portions of public presentations (i.e. question periods) by giving participants guidelines for lines of questioning that focus on the job skills/requirements and on the content of the presentation.

In addition to structuring the content, and evaluation, of social interview elements, another option for libraries is to structurally segment these elements from the rest of the interview process as a way of isolating the potential bias risk they introduce. There are at least two possible ways to approach this. First, evaluative feedback could be gathered individually for each element of the interview process (with specific criteria for each), even if attendees participated in multiple elements (e.g. a departmental meeting with a candidate, a public presentation, and a meal). This would allow feedback specific to social elements to be considered separately, and would

potentially make it easier to identify biased feedback based on these elements. Second, libraries could consider using different participants for social interview elements (especially meals; less so presentations), so that those who attend a social event are not also evaluating the structured interview segments. This could be extended to say that no one with a formal role in the search process (for example, search committee members or hiring managers) would participate in meals or social elements, and that no feedback would be collected from those who do participate. This would mean that these social times would be primarily for the candidate's benefit, making them feel welcome and giving them a chance to ask questions about the institution's culture while ensuring that those social times do not influence the search process itself.

Rethink

If there is not a firm commitment or requirement to include social performance elements in a specific hiring process, the best option—beyond education and introducing structure—might be to rethink the use of these elements in the interview altogether. One of the survey respondents clearly stated this idea, as well as reasons to do so: “We try to be cognizant of the fact that people we are interviewing may not be comfortable eating and socializing with a group of white women as part of a professional interview and we feel that it creates a burden on interviewees who are not white women. We also don't do presentations because we try to limit interviews to a short time so that candidates don't need to lose wages or PTO in their current jobs.”

Group meals are likely the easiest element to consider eliminating from the interview process. With the exception of positions requiring regular attendance at social events, there are no clear connections between candidate performance during a meal and ability to meet job requirements. However, given that eliminating hosted meals altogether could create both logistical and financial burdens for candidates, especially in interviews lasting one or more full days, a reasonable alternative strategy is to consider providing meals where the candidate can be alone, take a break, and reflect. This might mean, for example, a chance for a private boxed lunch during a long interview day or a gift certificate to cover dinner after the interview.

Presentations are more clearly applicable to some job types, and there is likely to be more resistance to eliminating them entirely. Most survey respondents indicated that an important value of presentations was to “evaluate how the candidate communicates in a public forum” and indeed, if the position will be teaching or presenting regularly, the required job qualifications may include the ability to present to an audience. Based on that, a presentation *may* be a good demonstration of the candidate's skills in a required qualification (despite, as was noted in the literature, the artificially performative nature of one of the most common presentation types, the mock instruction session). However, many librarian positions do not require teaching or public presentations as part of their regular responsibilities; even requirements for scholarly activity for faculty librarians can usually be met through other means than conference presentations.⁴⁵ If public presenting or teaching is not core to the work of a particular position, institutions should rethink the presentation element of the interview and consider how to provide a more relevant means of evaluating the candidate. One way to do this, if the position requires management or leading a team, can be to consider asking candidates to facilitate a discussion in a group, rather than give a presentation. The evaluation could then be focused on the candidate's ability to make sure all voices in the group are heard and the level to which the group feels that there is a clear outcome to the discussion, thereby reflecting leadership and facilitation skills that match the job requirements.

Because these choices are different from many current interviewing practices, it may be helpful to be explicit with candidates about the reasons for the changes. For example, meals during the interview are often considered a way to help a candidate feel welcome, so if an institution chooses not to host a meal, it would help to explain to the candidate that this is a deliberate choice to help evaluate each candidate fairly.

Postscript from a Pandemic: Online Interviews

To a large extent, the assumptions and recommendations reflected in this paper presume an imminent return to in-person hiring practices and a need to address established conventions in that format. However, it's important to acknowledge that interview processes will likely be significantly, and perhaps permanently, changed by the

forced move to an online environment over the past year. The pandemic has upended hiring practices; it has not only forced interviews to move online for participant safety but has meant that university budgets have shrunk and many positions have gone unfilled. It remains to be seen how these changes may become permanent as institutions look at online interviews as a way to save money on candidate travel, meals, and other costs associated with hiring.

While interviewing online can reduce the risk of unstructured social encounters by eliminating many traditional social events like meals, it can also make it more difficult for a candidate to feel welcomed by an institution or give them any sense of their future colleagues, if they have no ability to connect with the workplace beyond the interview sessions. Given the importance placed on this both in the literature and by survey respondents, it may be worth considering creating an opportunity to welcome candidates without forcing social performance—for example, through a meet and greet that is explicitly for giving candidates a sense of the campus, area, and colleagues. This could be structured with pre-prepared questions and topics and a staff member moderating. The candidate might have a chance to submit any additional questions in advance, but the focus would not be on hearing from them. This was suggested by one survey respondent: “We used Zoom to host a ‘meet and greet.’ We invited faculty and staff from a variety of departments to come and share with the candidate their experience at the university. This session was non-library related. It was geared toward telling the candidates about our area and campus culture. It was helpful to get feedback from staff who work outside of the library. Their perspective was unique and objective.”

While meals and social gatherings are more difficult (and awkward) to replicate online, presentations are more likely to continue in online interviewing. Indeed, several survey respondents indicated that they had asked candidates to prepare a presentation for an online interview conducted in the past year. As above, we recommend that these presentations be limited to those roles that require presentations or teaching as a regular job duty, and, when a presentation is a part of the interview, that attendees are provided with a list of the required job qualifications that relate to presentation performance, as a way to structure the feedback received from presentation attendees.

LOOKING FORWARD

In exploring the role and perceived value of unstructured, social performance elements in academic library hiring, it is clear—from the literature, hiring guidelines and documents, and this pilot study—that they are largely assumed to be beneficial for both candidates and the hiring institution. However, the assumed value of these elements appears largely anecdotal. In contrast, given the substantial evidence outside of librarianship that unstructured interview elements, especially those requiring social performance, can introduce bias and help perpetuate status quo culture in organizations, we encourage libraries to explore strategies like those recommended in this paper for rethinking the role and structure of these elements in their hiring practices.

While we believe there is ample cause for libraries to take action now, it would also be beneficial for researchers to conduct additional studies that would more conclusively demonstrate the harm caused by social performance in hiring within our own profession. To better understand the ways in which social performance elements introduce bias into library hiring, and impact the interview experience (and outcomes) for candidates from historically marginalized groups, two streams of research are needed. First, building on studies in psychological and organizational literature, more investigation is needed into the experience of academic library search committee members and hiring managers and the extent to which candidate evaluations and decisions incorporate information from social interview elements (especially with regard to discussing candidates’ perceived cultural fit within an organization). Second, in order to directly test (and challenge) the general presumption that candidates benefit from social interview elements, research into individuals’ experiences of these elements during their candidating process is needed—with a specific emphasis on identifying any differences in experience between candidates who identified with the majority culture of their prospective institution and those who did not. Following both lines of inquiry—into the experiences of search committees and of candidates—will help provide more complete and definitive evidence as to the value and impact of social performance requirements in library hiring.

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