# Core Best Practices for Academic Interviews

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Introduction

The library profession has seen radical change in people’s thinking about all aspects of work and life, due in part to the sudden and prolonged shift to remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing calls for social justice and antiracism in our services and practices. While many manuals for hiring and interviewing exist, including those in professional library associations and organizations, they may already be out of step with the rapid changes of recent years. This document seeks to capture emerging best practices as well as recommendations to encourage organizations to audit their interview processes to determine how unexamined assumptions and traditional practices may be disadvantageous to some applicants.

The format of the academic library interview has historically been similar across many organizations: a one or two day onsite visit with interview panels, individual meetings, meals, and a presentation. Necessitated by the pandemic, libraries have begun trying new formats including conducting interviews online, holding shorter interviews, and even hosting group interviews. Experimentation in itself is a positive trend, if it means examining what aspects are most important about the process and carefully selecting which aspects should remain from the traditional interview.

The principles and suggested action items below will help guide this examination while providing flexibility to try out new interview schedules and models, always maintaining focus on candidate-friendly and anti-bias practices.

Guiding Principles

Structure and Consistency

A structured interview is one where the process and questions are decided in advance and the same questions are used for every candidate, as opposed to a more free-flowing, organic conversation with each candidate, where the determination of questions occurs spontaneously during the interview. While the latter unstructured approach can be easier to arrange and feel more natural during the interview, it may lead to significant differences in the information gained from each interview and thus lead to difficulties evaluating candidates on the same qualifications. The process of determining questions in advance also helps ensure that these questions are focused on the job requirements, reducing the likelihood of evaluating candidates on non-essential qualities or skills and leaving less room for personal biases to influence feedback. For these reasons, it is important to not only structure the interview in advance, but to use a uniform structure and questions for each candidate. This ensures that those providing feedback are evaluating each person using the same assessment.
Preparation and Planning

The more prepared the organization is to host the candidates, the better the overall experience will be. Preparation includes: creating and distributing an interview schedule, designating someone to guide Q&A sessions, and determining how the candidate will get from each part of the interview to the next (airport to hotel/campus, hotel to first meeting, virtual meeting to virtual meeting, etc). Regardless of the state of the LIS job market, candidates are evaluating organizations just as much if not more than organizations are evaluating them.

The hiring manager and search committee should understand and be able to explain the function of each part of the interview to ensure that each session is needed to evaluate the candidate and/or for the candidate to evaluate the organization. It may be that some sessions can be non-evaluative, with the purpose of helping the candidate learn more about the organizational culture and giving participants a chance to interact with a potential new colleague, but do not generate feedback or evaluation for the search committee. If the hiring institution chooses to include non-evaluative sessions, stress to the participants that their review of the candidate will not include those sessions. Be sure the candidate is aware of which sessions are non-evaluative.

Some reflection questions for search committees to consider:

1. What parts of the interview are purely informational, and could be shared with the candidate or answered prior to the interview?
2. If scheduling small group meetings, consider why each group is meeting with the candidate and how will that group assist with the evaluation. Does each group have sufficient knowledge of the duties of the position to evaluate the candidates successfully? If not, would this meeting provide the candidate with information about work practices or department culture in a non-evaluative session?
3. If the interview includes unstructured times such as meals or social sessions, consider what the purpose of these times are, and how to mitigate against inappropriate questions and unconscious bias. Consider whether these unstructured times are necessary to effectively evaluate the candidate, or whether the organization can provide meals and breaks in a non-evaluative setting.
4. If the candidate will be asked to give a presentation or job talk, consider what the main purpose is of the presentation or job talk. Will the candidate be expected to regularly present to non-library groups? If not, then consider omitting a job talk or exploring other group participation options such as asking the candidate to facilitate a group discussion (see Appendix).
5. Do you include a research/service expectations (common among faculty librarian positions) component in the interview? You might consider how the information included in that session could be communicated outside of the interview schedule. Consider what kind of session would provide your candidate with the information needed to understand the expectations of the position.
The Danger of “Fit”

Organizations have often looked for candidates that seem to “fit” the culture in their workplace. This may mean candidates who have similar interests, who seem easy to talk to, or who have similar backgrounds to hiring stakeholders. Hiring candidates who seem comfortable on a first meeting is an understandable desire and may indeed mean that a new hire is easier to work with initially; however it is worth considering the impact of hiring for “fit.” By hiring candidates who seem to fit easily into the workplace culture, the organization risks homogeneity and the reproduction of a culture that, in many organizations, centers on dominant identities. As most higher education institutions are historically grounded in and continue to reflect these dominant cultural identities, hiring managers and organizations must critically consider how hiring for “fit” may replicate those dominant identities and thereby impact the future direction of the institution. In addition to perpetuating bias against candidates from other identities, organizations that hire for “fit” also risk stagnation and missing opportunities to innovate and move forward. Creating hiring practices that reduce the impact of “fit” as a deciding factor, focusing instead on stated job qualifications, will help organizations more equitably evaluate candidates for their capabilities and applicable experience, instead of subjective impressions of their future colleagueship. For further information about the dangers of “fit,” please consult this document’s Bibliography.

Best Practices for Each Stage of the Interview Process

Before The Interview

1. Provide training on implicit bias for all individuals participating in the interview (search committee members, those in individual and group meetings, as well as those joining for meals, when possible). Many examples of such training exist online or through institutions. The training should help participants understand the potential for bias in interviews and strategies to mitigate it.

2. Consider creating a rubric for evaluating the interview, based on high priority job qualifications. This rubric can help focus the evaluation process on the aspects that are most important for the candidate to perform the job successfully.

3. Communicate norms and roles for participating individuals in the organization.
   a. For those meeting with candidates, underscore the importance of asking all candidates the same questions, allowing for clarifying follow-up questions to enable better understanding. For those who will not be participating in a meeting, but may attend a job talk or a meal, explain the purpose behind those sessions and what kind of evaluation is expected.
   b. Send candidates’ CV, cover letter, position description, and interview schedule (include names and titles of each person the candidate will meet with) to all persons participating in the interview. Redact personally identifiable information in
the CV and cover letter such as mailing address, email address, and phone number.

4. Consider accessibility needs universally for both candidates and participants from the organization, no matter whether the interview is in-person, virtual, or hybrid.
   a. Consider asking the candidate: “Is there anything you need in order to participate in the interview?” to allow the candidate to share any accommodations needed to successfully participate.

5. When determining the interview date(s), give candidates a selection of dates to choose from and consider interview day start and end times, to offer flexibility around other commitments.
   a. Determine the necessity of starting or ending interviews on a weekend (this includes travel time), as that may negatively impact those candidates with care responsibilities or other commitments.
   b. Whenever possible, keep the candidate’s travel schedule and time zone in mind when creating the interview schedule.

6. When creating and sharing an interview schedule with the candidate, consider including purpose statements for interview segments to describe what the candidate will gain from each meeting and whether or not they will be evaluated during each segment. For example, a meeting with department staff may have the purpose of sharing information about departmental workflows but the staff will not be asked to evaluate the candidate, so the candidate can use that time to gain information about the workplace.

7. Provide candidates with information, links, and/or contacts to learn about the campus and area, as well as unstructured time to explore campus or the area, as time permits.

8. Ask candidates if they have pronouns and phonetic name pronunciation they would like to share. These can be added to the shared schedule and/or calendar entries.

9. Consider providing written interview questions for selected meetings before or during the interview, to ensure candidates have the opportunity to meaningfully reflect on their experiences when answering the question, to meet any accessibility needs of candidates, and to underscore that you are not evaluating candidates on aspects like listening under pressure.
   a. Each candidate should receive the questions the same amount of time prior to the interview (e.g. 24 hours before, etc).

10. If not providing questions ahead of time, strongly encourage those participating in the interview to draft questions in advance of any sessions they are a part of. This will ensure that each candidate will provide information addressing the same topics, thereby resulting in a more equitable evaluation of their candidacy.

During The Interview

1. Ask all candidates the same set of questions in the same order. Individual candidate answers may prompt follow-up clarifying questions, but confining the main questions to the same script will help ensure equitable dialog and evaluation across candidates.

2. Encourage all individuals asking questions of the candidates to introduce themselves with pronouns and provide space for candidates to identify their own.
3. Help the candidate understand their potential working environment.
   a. Provide a tour of the library and specific workspaces.
   b. Ask the candidate what their access preferences are (e.g., stairs vs. elevator).
4. Describe the next phases and timeline of the search process when meeting with each candidate.
   a. Discuss beforehand what additional steps will take place after the interview (reference check, dossier review for faculty librarians and promotion/tenure vote, submitting recommendation to Dean/Director or administration).

After The Interview

1. Send an evaluation template to interview participants, with specific questions around key job qualifications and duties. Ask participants to identify which sessions they participated in or what application materials they consulted to form the basis of their evaluation. Consider avoiding open-ended prompts for comments on candidates, to ensure that the search committee does not receive feedback on the candidate that is unrelated to the job qualifications.
   a. Consider whether some participants (for example, those only attending meals or meet and greets) do not have sufficient background to provide meaningful feedback about how a candidate will meet the job qualifications and therefore should not receive the evaluation.
   b. Whenever possible, send evaluation forms to participants immediately following each interview, rather than wait until all candidates have interviewed to encourage equitable evaluation of each person. Such a process helps the participants to focus on how each candidate meets the specific job qualifications, rather than a comparison between candidates.

Best Practices for Each Interview Format

Best Practices for In Person Interviews

Meeting candidates in an in-person setting has been the traditional method for interviews to take place. In-person interviews offer a richness of experience for both the candidate and the hiring organization, provide opportunities for more feedback and communication, and may best be able to represent both the organization and the candidate. However, they do introduce more stress around travel, scheduling, and meals that need to be addressed.

1. If possible, ensure that travel arrangements take into account candidate preferences and do not require the candidate to expend their own funds.
   a. Ask if the candidate prefers to book their own travel and be reimbursed or to have the hiring organization make the arrangements.
b. Be able to direct your candidates to written documentation explaining the reimbursement process, so they have a procedure to refer to later on. If none exists, create one prior to this phase of the process.

c. If the candidate chooses to have the hiring organization make the arrangements, be clear that their personal preferences and needs will be accommodated. (window vs. aisle seat, morning vs. evening flights, hotel very close to campus near the action or further outside of campus/town, etc).

2. Ensure that breaks and mealtimes (if included) take into account candidate preferences, allergies, and dietary needs.
   a. If the schedule will include comfort breaks, ask what kinds of foods the candidate prefers to have available.
   b. Select restaurants with a broad range of options to provide options that accommodate food preferences.
      i. Send a list of potential restaurants to candidates before the schedule is finalized to be sure that, separate from allergies and dietary needs, there is something available that they will want to eat.

Best Practices for Online Interviews

Online interviews can be well-suited to interviews that may have a small number of meetings or take place when travel can be difficult or unpredictable (e.g., during the winter in areas prone to large snow storms). Perhaps most impactful, online interviews create a level playing field while employees are working a remote or hybrid schedule. Fully remote interviews can be easier to manage than facilitating a mix of in-person and online meetings. When designing a virtual interview, consider how best to create a welcoming and inclusive environment: Will all questions be entered into the chat and asked orally? Will audio transcription be enabled? Will sessions start at the appointed time or will a few grace minutes be given to work out any issues with technology for the candidate or those participating in the interview?

1. If possible, avoid having some candidates be in-person and some virtual. This will make it difficult for stakeholders to evaluate the candidates without the format interfering.

2. Ensure that technology used for online interviews does not impact the candidate’s experience or evaluation.
   a. Use the same platform for all interviews to ensure that the same functionality is available.
   b. Do not assume the candidates have familiarity with the chosen platform. When communicating with the candidates, provide links to download or otherwise access the platform in advance of the interview.
   c. Establish a back-up option if technology (audio, video, Internet connection) fails.
   d. Provide a moderator/technical support contact for the candidate in case of technical difficulties.
   e. Offer a time prior to the interview to meet with the candidate so that they can test their connection, ensure that their software is up to date, and have the ability to share their screen.
3. Consider whether having the candidate’s camera turned on is necessary to effectively evaluate the candidate.

4. Communicate norms and roles to all participating individuals in the organization.
   a. Provide meeting norms explaining to all interview participants how they can participate in each session (chat, raise hand, microphone/video, introductions may include name, job title, and pronouns).
   b. When asking participants to evaluate candidates, be explicit how, if at all, a facility with the technology used as part of the interview should be addressed.
   c. For larger group sessions, assign someone a moderator/facilitator role to call on individuals with questions.

5. Create an interview schedule that is mindful of the candidate’s needs, care responsibilities, and time zone.
   a. Verify with the candidate what time zone they will be in during the interview. Provide both the local institution’s time zone and the candidate’s time zone on the interview schedule to avoid confusion.
   b. When possible, provide an opportunity for the candidate to help construct the timeframe of the interview (start and end times) that works best for them, while giving equal time to all candidates.
   c. Be mindful of fatigue from online meetings, which may be different from fatigue from meeting in-person. Consider breaking up the interview into shorter sections with longer breaks in between. An online interview should not mimic an in-person full-day schedule.
   d. When arranging for an online interview, hiring managers might consider offering candidates the option of a hotel room or other space to provide an environment best suited to their needs, at the institution’s expense. If so, hiring managers should plan to pay for or reimburse candidates for those expenses.

6. If recording any part of the interview, communicate expectations to all who will have access to the content. Questions to consider may include: Can anyone share the link? How long will the link be available?
   a. If any portion of the interview will be recorded (job talk, etc) obtain written permission ahead of time from each candidate.

Best Practices for Hybrid Interviews

Hybrid interviews can be useful in situations when the candidate is physically present but not all key stakeholders can be physically present. Such situations could include responding to health precautions, travel conflicts, or non-work commitments. Whereas pre-pandemic those unable to come to campus would likely not participate, stakeholder expectations for being able to participate in interviews has shifted. Hybrid interviews may include a combination of completely in-person and completely remote sections of the interview, or meetings where the candidate interacts with in-person and online stakeholders simultaneously. Preparing to conduct a hybrid interview should include elements of both in-person and online interviews. While there may be valid reasons to conduct an interview in a hybrid format, it can be particularly challenging for online participants to have the same level of engagement and participation when they are not in
the same space as the individuals together in-person, so special care must be taken to support them. The unique aspects of this format are described below.

1. When scheduling the interview, explain why a hybrid format has been chosen and how the in-person and online components of the interview will fit together.
2. Set aside time in the interview schedule to test any technology needed to fully participate in the job talk or other sessions.
3. Consider what spaces will be optimal for both in-person and online participants.
4. If there are in-person and virtual participants, designate an in-person facilitator and a second person to monitor the chat or other online communication tools.

References / Resource List

Hiring Guidelines

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“Best Practices for Virtual Interviewing.” Case Western Reserve University (December 2020).

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Articles Related to Hiring


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Appendix

Facilitated Discussion Topic:

The Library’s Collection Services department is a busy unit, acquiring and cataloging information resources for our campus. The unit must maintain close working relationships with a number of other departments in the library and across campus. Please lead participants in exploring strategies for maintaining and growing these collaborations.

Instructions for candidate:

Please facilitate a discussion on the topic above that:

- Is constructively framed for the available time
- Is inclusive of the perspectives of different stakeholders
- Engages participants of varying communication styles
- Provides participants with a clear idea of possible next steps

Instructions for participants:

We have asked the candidate to guide a discussion on this topic: Our goal for this session is to assess the candidate’s ability to facilitate an inclusive dialogue that results in a clear understanding for participants of the possible next steps from the discussion.

This session will only be successful if participants (you!) are fully engaged and the candidate has an opportunity to facilitate a lively conversation.

To that end, please:

- Be prepared with your own thoughts and questions on the topic
- Be yourself! It will be good for the candidate to engage with different communication styles, so participate in the manner that is most comfortable for you

As you participate, please observe what you think works well (or not) with regard to the candidate’s facilitation approach so that you can share that with the search committee.