

Mock Interviews for ACE Scholars: Preparing for the Professional Job Search

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Abstract:

The article discusses the mock interviews conducted among student members of the Academic Cultural Enrichment (ACE) Scholars cohort at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNCG). The interviews are divided into two phases, the first of which consisted of simulated telephone interviews and the second consisted of a simulate search committee interview. Students were requested to submit a completed application package to allow review of cover letters and resumes they will submit to actual employers. According to the authors, the activity has provided a positive learning experience for librarians and students.

Keywords: Librarians | Student Interviews | Scholarships | Library Science Education | Vocational guidance

Article:

In 2011, librarians from different areas of expertise collaborated to create and implement a program that provided an opportunity for a group of graduating Library and Information Studies (US) students from the University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNCG) to have practice telephone and in-person interviews with a mock search committee in order to prepare them for job interviews for positions in academic libraries. The students were all members of the ACE (Academic Cultural Enrichment) Scholars cohort, which is sponsored by an Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant, designed to broaden the level of diversity within the library profession.

We each had a strong interest in working with LIS students preparing for their first professional job search. Each of us work in different departments within the library and are at different stages in our career, so we brought our varied experiences to this project: professional recruitment,

student advising, and recent job search experience. Each of us has served on search committees and reviewed countless application packages that often fail to answer the questions that were posed in the position posting.

Prior to offering this service, we investigated the career placement services offered at UNCG and found that there was no specific interview preparation available for graduating LIS students. The majority of the placement services available were geared toward undergraduates. Graduate students in fields such as business had their recruiting and placement needs handled by their respective schools. In addition, the focus on interview preparation and resume writing workshops seemed to be geared towards those seeking employment in the private sector, not academia. This was a particular disadvantage to those who wanted to work in academic libraries, which usually hire by search committee. While there may be some similarities to hiring practices in the private sector, we thought it would be beneficial to give the students an orientation to search committee hiring, as well as to giving a presentation, which is frequently required during interviews within academia. Our group would be able to provide a service to these students that the placement center did not emphasize.

In an informal survey, we learned that many of the students in this group had not previously participated in a telephone interview (done as a matter of common practice today, as the first step in the interview process) nor had they previously been interviewed by a panel of interviewers. The career placement center at our university had very limited offerings for panel interviewing opportunities, which is standard practice for academic library candidates.

As librarians, who had worked with the ACE Scholars program in one capacity or another, we all had a vested interest in helping to prepare these students for their first professional job search. Prior to conducting the mock interviews, a workshop on preparing for the job hunt was given. In this session, two UNCG librarians provided suggestions on resume and cover letter preparation, as well as what to expect when interviewing in an academic library. Suggestions included considerations for professional presence, interview apparel advice, and how to respond to commonly asked questions.

Our offer to provide opportunities for mock interviews was modeled after common practices which are used by not only by many university career placement offices, but also by professional recruitment and outplacement firms. As a part of a continuing trend, many university placement officials reach out to Human Resources professionals and Human Resources professional organizations in their community in an attempt to obtain expert "real world" guidance to graduates that are often seeking their first professional position. In order to provide the ACE Scholars with similar "real world" experience, we decided to offer the mock interviews in two phases; the first phase consisted of simulated telephone interviews and the second phase consisted of a simulated search committee interview that included a candidate presentation. Both interviews were recorded, so the participant could have the opportunity to review the interview and make adjustments where appropriate.

To initiate the mock interview process, an e-mail was sent to all ACE Scholars, inviting them to participate in the mock interviews. As a requirement of participation, we asked that they each provide the following information: an application package consisting of a resume/CV and a cover letter responding to a fabricated position description, designed for an entry level librarian, which was included in the e-mail invitation. The students were also given the option to submit a cover letter for an actual position for which they may have been applying. They were required to provide us with a copy of the position description. We wanted the students to submit the materials to us just as they would submit an application to an actual employment posting. It is common practice to require that candidates give a presentation as part of the interview process for a position in an academic library, so we told the students that their mock interview would require them to deliver a 10- to 15-minute presentation. We selected "Changing Times in Academic Libraries" as the topic.

Requesting students submit a completed application package as if they were applying for an actual position allowed us to review the cover letters and resumes they would submit to actual employers and provide constructive feedback. A cover letter or a resume that does not sufficiently address the qualifications of the posting will probably not result in an invitation for an interview. We wanted to ensure that common mistakes made by applicants were eliminated in the application materials.

The first phase of the mock interview process was the telephone interview. Candidates often underestimate the importance of a telephone interview. A telephone interview that fails to impress the search committee will not result in an invitation for an on-campus interview. It can be disconcerting for someone to participate in a telephone interview, because the person is not able to see the facial expressions of the interviewers. The inability to judge how well an answer to a question was received may cause an applicant to become nervous (or increase their nervousness), and, as a result, not respond to subsequent questions in a positive or enthusiastic manner.

In order to allay the concerns of many applicants we provided suggestions in advance on how to reduce the anxiety in a telephone interview. Suggestions included using a landline to eliminate the possibility of a broken cell phone connection; dressing as if the interview was being conducted in person to reinforce the seriousness of the event; practicing answers to common inquiries such as, "Tell me about yourself"; and the importance of conveying a sense of enthusiasm for the position.

We conducted telephone interviews with participants using only the information they provided us. Upon completion of the telephone interviews, the mock interview team provided constructive feedback on areas such as timing and speech patterns. The second part of the mock interviews involved simulating the on-campus interview. Approximately 10 to 15 minutes was devoted to questioning the student about the position and their qualifications (asking different questions than were used in the phone interview), and the remainder of the interview was the presentation.

All presentations were recorded to allow the participants to observe their on-camera behavior. Recording the presentations allowed the students to actually view their presentation performance and work to make improvements in their presentation skills. Any student who could not be present for a live interview was allowed to use virtual meeting software in order to participate.

While simulated interviewing sessions might be common practice in other arenas, it was our small group that offered this service for the first time to UNCG LIS students. Six ACE Scholars (out of 14) elected to participate in both practice sessions. An additional eight members of the cohort did not participate in the mock interviews, but asked us individual questions and asked us to review their cover letters and resumes. We received several positive comments from participants, and one participant went on to receive the job she prepared for during her mock interview. Some of the participants' comments include:

"I'd like to especially thank Gerald for setting up the mock interviews...appreciate the phone interview tips and the video as well."

"I feel like a whole village is coming together to help me succeed. Thank you all so much."

"I just completed my phone interview, and I think it went really well. I was far less nervous than I was yesterday (during the mock telephone interview), and I made sure to make use of all your valuable advice and suggestions. I could not have done it without you."

Overall, it was a positive learning experience for the librarians and the students. We now have a stronger grasp on the kinds of preparation LIS students need and how best to offer that preparation. As of this writing, all six of the participants are now employed full time as academic librarians. We plan to offer our services to the second cohort of ACE Scholars. Realizing how important this preparation is in the current job market, we are working towards expanding the resume review and mock interview services to include other LIS students at UNCG.

Additional Reading

K. Hansen, Gary C. Oliphant, Becky J. Oliphant, and Randall S. Hansen, "Best Practices in Preparing Students for Mock Interviews," *Business Communication Quarterly* 72, no. 3 (2009): 318-27.

D. Engle and Sarah Robbins, "Telephone Interviewing Practices within Academic Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 35, no. 2 (2009): 143-51.