

Pulling Back the Curtain: Preparing Students for the Academic Job Interview

Kawanna Bright

East Carolina University, US

brightka19@ecu.edu

ABSTRACT

The LIBS 6810: Academic Libraries course offered in the Master of Library Science Program at East Carolina University was originally structured to offer students a broad overview of working in academic libraries. To insert more practicality into the course, the author expanded two assignments to move students from completing hypothetical plans related to their future careers, to identifying a position to apply for and participating in a job talk interview with a mock search committee of professionals in the field. Students' reflections indicate the updated assignments had the benefit of revealing the realities of the academic job search process and building students' confidence in their ability to obtain a position after graduation. This case study details the activities and to update the assignments, shares students' reflections on the activities, and offers recommendations for structuring the assignments and the course for others interested in applying the same approach.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Curriculum; Pedagogy; Academic libraries; Students.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Networking; Real-world experience; Job searching.

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INTRODUCTION

The practicality of the library and information science (LIS) education has often been debated by practitioners and educators alike (Blankson-Hemans & Hibberd, 2004). One of the major concerns is the balance between theory and practice in the LIS curriculum (White, 2016) and the ability of the curriculum to prepare new librarians for success in the field, with recent shifts towards making the curriculum more practical (Winnick, 2023). But while much of the focus has been ensuring that the LIS curriculum provides students with practical skills that they can apply in their professional positions (Eckard et al., 2014; Saunders, 2019), little attention has been given to whether the LIS curriculum prepares students to apply for and obtain their first professional position. A number of sources offers suggestions for the job search process and discuss the potential role of the LIS curriculum (Eckard et al., 2014), but no source directly discusses specific efforts undertaken by teaching faculty to ensure students are prepared for the actual job search process. The purpose of this case study is to present one professor's efforts to integrate support for the job search process into an academic libraries course, and students' responses to those efforts. The overarching question explored is "what impact does integration of job search preparation have on students' perception of their readiness to enter the professional workforce?"

LIBS 6810: ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

LIBS 6810: Academic Libraries is a required course for students in the academic librarianship concentration of East Carolina University's (ECU) Master of Library Science (MLS) program. The course is offered each fall semester with an enrollment of up to 20 students. The author has taught the course since 2020, inheriting the course structure from a colleague. Originally, the course offered an overview of academic libraries, including current trends, where academic libraries fit within higher education, and the structure of academic libraries. The major assignments for the course included evaluation of an academic libraries' mission statement, creation of a career plan, and a research paper exploring a current trend.

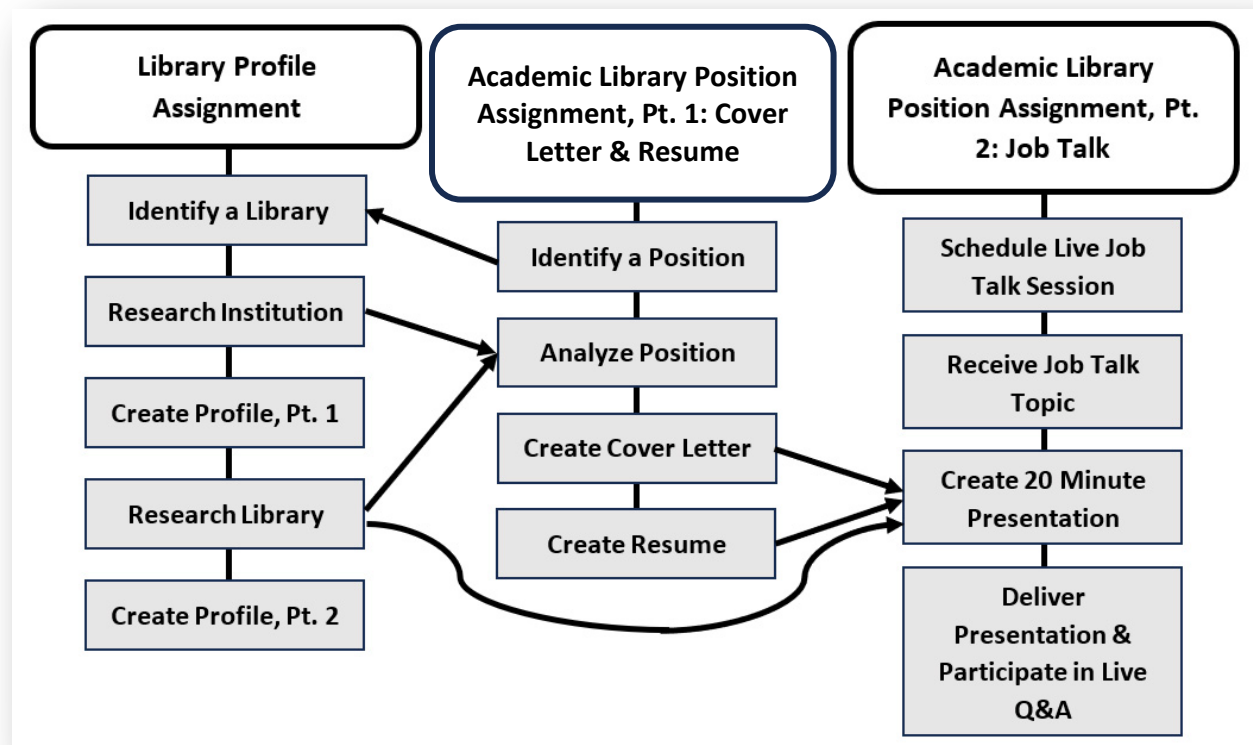
In fall 2020, the author made changes to the main assignments, including expansion of the mission statement evaluation assignment into creation of a full library profile and additions to the career plan to have students create a cover letter and lightning talk for a position. The goal was to encourage students to think holistically about working in academic libraries, including taking time to research the organization as a potential workplace, and thinking strategically about the job application process. In subsequent semesters, the author made additional adjustments to create connections between assignments and introducing realness to the activities. In fall 2023, the author implemented a scaffolded structure that fully connected three assignments (Library Profile, Cover Letter & Resume, and Job Talk) to introduce students fully to the academic job search process.

Updated assignment design.

To scaffold and connect the assignments (Figure 1), the author moved the position identification from the Cover Letter assignment to earlier in the course and required students to use the library from that position for their Library Profile assignment. This required the students to research the library and think through understanding the organization from the perspective of someone interested in working there.

Figure 1

Visual Structure of Scaffolded and Connected Assignments



Assignment completion.

Students were able to work on collecting information for their library profiles and creating their cover letters and resumes simultaneously. To support their work, the author hosted a guest speaker who shared information from a search committee member's perspective and provided students with insights into the application process. Students' cover letters and resumes were reviewed by the instructor and students were able to update these materials before they were shared with members of a mock search committee.

Mock search committees.

Mock search committee members were recruited from the author's network of former colleagues and LIS peers. A call was posted to Facebook and those interested completed a survey to indicate their availability. A total of 16 professionals volunteered, representing a range of experiences and knowledge, including a number of academic library leaders. Each committee member was provided with an anonymized copy of the student's cover letter and resume, and a

scoring rubric (Figure 2). The scoring rubric was only used to provide students with an idea of how they would be scored by a search committee member in an interview situation, and not to determine a grade for the course.

Figure 2
Job Talk Scoring Rubric

	Proficient 5	Competent 4	Needs Improvement 3
Alignment <i>Content and information shared in applicant's job talk presentation aligns with the provided job talk topic.</i>	Content and information shared fully aligns with the provided job talk topic. Applicant does not stray from topic, or any tangential information is fully connected back to the topic by applicant	Content and information shared mostly aligns with the provided job talk topic. Applicant may stray from topic once or twice. Some tangential information not fully connected back to the topic by applicant	Content and information shared does not align well with the provided job talk topic. Applicant often strays from topic throughout presentation. A lot of tangential information is never connected back to the topic by applicant
Depth <i>Depth of the information shared in applicant's job talk presentation. Applicant provides details and concrete examples that support the information shared</i>	Information shared with a high level of detail. Applicant always utilizes concrete examples to support the information.	Information shared with a good level of detail, though some items shared at a surface level. Applicant utilizes some concrete examples to support information, but some elements shared without support.	Information shared with a low level of detail, with many items shared at a surface level. Applicant does not utilize concrete examples to support information and most elements shared without support.
Relevance/Currency <i>Information shared connects to and is relevant to the current academic library environment. Applicant includes or relies on relevant external sources to support information shared.</i>	Information shared clearly connects to topics that are relevant to the current academic library environment. Applicant includes relevant external sources to support claims.	Information shared mostly connects to topics that are relevant to the current academic library environment, though some information may be outdated. Applicant includes external sources to support claims, though not all sources are relevant.	Information shared does not connect to topics that are relevant to the current academic library environment. Most of the information is outdated. Applicant does not include external sources to support claims, or all sources used are not relevant to the topic or information shared.
Creativity <i>Applicant utilizes creativity within visuals to support sharing of information.</i>	Creativity is evident in the visuals utilized by the applicant to support the information being shared.	Some creativity is evident in the visuals utilized by the applicant to support the information being shared.	A lack of creativity is evident in the visuals utilized by the applicant to support the information being shared.
Q&A Quality <i>Applicant is prepared to participate in Q&A session, providing high quality and relevant responses to questions from mock search committee. Student showcases knowledge of presentation content during Q&A session or is able to expand on content to address questions.</i>	Applicant fully engages in Q&A session. Applicant is clearly prepared to respond to questions about presentation and provides high quality and relevant responses to questions from search committee members. Applicant's responses showcase knowledge of presentation content; and applicant is able to expand on content to address questions.	Applicant mostly engages in Q&A session. Applicant is mostly prepared to respond to questions about presentation and provides good quality and mostly relevant responses to questions from search committee members. Applicant's responses mostly showcase knowledge of presentation content, though applicant may struggle to expand on content to address questions.	Applicant participates in the Q&A session but may seem disengaged. Applicant is not prepared to respond to questions about presentation and provides low quality or irrelevant responses to question from search committee members. Applicant's responses do not showcase knowledge of presentation content and applicant is unable to expand on content to address questions.

Scheduling and coordination.

The author worked with students early in the semester to identify availability for the live job talk sessions. Both students and mock search committee members completed a Doodle poll identifying availability during the week of November 13th. Four students were paired with one search committee member plus the instructor; remaining students were paired with two search committee members plus the instructor. Two weeks before their scheduled sessions, students were provided with their job talk topic: "What is your value add to the library and the institution in this position? In other words, what will you bring to this position that makes you the best candidate?". Each session was scheduled for one-hour on WebEx. Students were given the first 20 minutes to present, followed by 10 minutes of Q&A from the search committee, and 30 minutes for committee members to offer suggestions to students and for students to ask the committee questions. All but one of the sessions was recorded and the video provided to the student.

STUDENT REFLECTIONS

Assessment of the job talk sessions was conducted indirectly through responses from students' final discussion board reflections for the prompt: "The most important thing you feel you learned during this course and how that will apply or impact your future career in academic libraries." The instructor identified 20 separate comments from students' main posts or responses to classmates that referenced the job talks. Comment review and analysis led to the identification of six themes and relevant quotes¹ related to awareness, confidence, gratitude, networking, learning opportunity, and overall beneficial.

Awareness.

Despite being in the academic library concentration, for many of the students this course and the Job Talk assignment were their first introduction to the academic library interview process. As one student noted, they "never considered that interviews in the field would require presentations" and they "learned that it is quite common for interviewees to have lunch with the hiring committee as another sort of interview. This practice was foreign to me before this class." Ensuring students were not put at a disadvantage by a lack of awareness is one of the main reasons the instructor created the assignment. As one student shared "If it wasn't for Dr. Bright, I'd be in a big shock at my first interview for this position." This lack of awareness turned into a high level of awareness, as shared by one student:

Prior to this course, I had limited knowledge of what a job talk entailed and what hiring committees sought, especially for someone with minimal experience in academic librarianship. However, completing the job talk has left me feeling more prepared, and equipped with a better understanding of how to effectively showcase my skills and demonstrate the value I can bring to an institution. This invaluable experience has provided me with tools to enhance my resume and presentation skills further.

Confidence.

Participating in the job talks brought out concerns for some students, with references to lack of confidence, anxiety, and dealing with imposter syndrome found in several comments. One student shared that "even knowing that nothing was at stake (job or grade) this assignment still caused so much anxiety" but they also shared that the experience "was very enlightening though and I enjoyed getting feedback from the panel." Some students noted a lack of confidence in even considering applying for a job, feeling as if they had not accomplished enough to be qualified, or that what they had accomplished was not good enough to share. As one student posted,

The most important thing I learned in this course is to have confidence during the interview process. More specifically, to have confidence when speaking about my accomplishments and experiences during an interview, as I can frame those accomplishments and experiences in such a way so that they are transferable and thus applicable to librarianship.

¹ Student comments are anonymized and presented with permission from the students.

One student felt that the process of engaging in the job talk “helped to increase my ability to be confident in myself and what I can do.”

Gratitude.

Many comments about the job talk experience expressed gratitude for the opportunity to experience the job search and interview process in a safe environment. One student noted that they were “grateful to have had the opportunity to have practiced speaking in front of a committee and creating a presentation for a job talk.” And another felt “the opportunity to try and fail and learn in a safe space was brilliant.” Considering that many students had never presented in a situation like the job talk, some of the appreciation was specifically for the presentation experience: “I have never had to give a presentation like that during the interview process, and I am so thankful for that experience.”

Networking.

Some students saw the sessions with the committee members as an opportunity to make connections with professionals in the field. As one student noted, “I’m also really grateful that Dr. Bright has introduced us to so many great connections to help start building our support systems.” Another student expanded this concept and indicated a plan to reach “out to some of the guests that have presented lectures...and asking them all for advice on the interview process like commonly asked questions or how I should dress for a lunch interview or even for presentation practice.”

Learning opportunity.

Ultimately, the job talk sessions and the process of applying for a real job was a learning opportunity for the students. Many noted that they had learned a lot about themselves and what they could work on to make them stronger candidates. One student felt they now had “a better understanding of what is expected of me during the hiring process and of my existing faults that I must work on improving.” This was echoed by another student who shared that “The Job Talks we did was a good indication [sic] of what I need to improve before I set out on my employment search.” One student noted the importance of having their search committee point out what they needed to work on: “Where I falter is in presenting myself as capable of doing the job. Dr. Bright and my job talk team pointed that out to me.” Another student focused specifically on what they learned about the process, noting “I learned its (sic) important to research expectations for the specific job title, learn about the campus culture, and research the library’s mission and values to be fully prepared for an interview.”

Overall beneficial.

In general, student comments indicated they found the job talks and the process of practicing applying for positions to be a positive of the course. This was clear given the number of students who indicated the job talks when responding to the prompt about the most important thing they learned. But this was also seen in the comments. As one student shared “The job talk was the most useful because it gave me a chance to practice and receive helpful feedback on the importance of preparing myself and showing how I can be valuable to the library.” One student

found the experience almost immediately beneficial as they participated in “real-life interviews” the following week and also described it as “breaking the fourth wall and getting a true understanding of what is to come in my future career!” Other students shared similar broader benefits beyond the course, with one student stating “At first I was bothered by the Job Talk thinking it was something I’d never use, but it turned out to be one of the most beneficial assignments (I think) of the entire program.” This sentiment was echoed by another student who stated that “Having the opportunity to make a presentation for Dr. Bright and Co. and hearing the feedback was one of the most valuable takeaways of the entire program,” and another noting “This is my third master’s degree, and I have never felt more prepared or excited to enter the post-graduate job market!”

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The students’ reflections on their experiences in the course and with the job talks specifically, support the author’s decision to restructure the course to offer students a more realistic view of applying for jobs in academic libraries. While developing skills that apply directly to the work students will perform as new professionals is important, getting the students into those positions should also be considered as an important part of LIS education. The shift from student to librarian can be a scary transition, as students struggle to present themselves as qualified and capable. Encouraging students to practice putting themselves through this process in a safe and supportive environment is recommended for any program interested in making that transition more seamless. The ultimate marker of success for this approach is the inclusion of professionals from the field, willing to share their expertise and offer themselves as future connections for students. Without the volunteers, some who participated in three separate sessions, it would not have been possible for the instructor to create this experience successfully. It is hoped that future iterations of the experience will be just as successful and something that students in the program look forward to.

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