

## Using Search Advocates to Mitigate Bias in Hiring: An Interview with Anne Gillies

Emily Weak

### Abstract

A commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion requires eliminating bias in hiring. Eliminating bias requires training, tools and cultural change. This interview with Anne Gillies of Oregon State University's Search Advocates provides a nuanced understanding of how search practices reinforce bias and how she has operationalized a program that has the capacity to create deep cultural change. Interviewed by Emily Weak of Hiring Librarians, she outlines her program's philosophy, as well as its origins and the challenges in measuring outcomes. Her program has found footing in academic libraries, but managers in public and other library types will benefit from understanding her methods.

### Introduction

From 2012-2016 I wrote the blog Hiring Librarians, which primarily featured survey interviews with people who hire library workers. In March of 2022, following my transition from full time work to consulting, I revived the blog. In the first iteration of Hiring Librarians, I had several eye-opening experiences related to understanding the ways in which bias is present in library hiring practices.

Bias contributes to the lack of diversity in our profession. While we may be able to spot explicit biases where people are overt with their prejudice, implicit and systemic biases are more insidious. Implicit or unconscious biases may manifest in ideas like "fit," where candidates are hired based on their affinity or similarity to existing staff. Systemic biases are part of the process and may manifest in things like outdated job descriptions or postings that are not distributed where diverse candidates will see them.

In the current iteration of the Hiring Librarians survey, I made sure to include a question to address bias:

"What does your organization do to reduce bias in hiring? What are the contexts in which discrimination still exists in this process?"

The answers continue to be eye-opening. While some respondents described procedures that attempt to mitigate bias, others expressed that they weren't doing anything ("We haven't

focused on this”), that they felt they weren’t doing enough, (“HR does a training about this but in my opinion it is inadequate”) or that they lacked tools (“We try to solicit diverse candidates but find it difficult and are constantly looking for ways to improve the process”). It is clear that as a field we need greater understanding of bias in hiring coupled with practical methods to mitigate it.

Larry Eames’ survey response was particularly intriguing, because he said, “At the system level, I went through training to join the Search Advocate Program which aims to enhance equity and inclusion in the search process.” I followed up, eager to learn specifics.

Search Advocates are people who receive special training on spotting bias in hiring. They join search committees as outsiders, providing a critical eye that can advise on practices that enhance (or detract from) equity in hiring. Eames’ training was conducted by Anne Gillies, who runs the Oregon State University program. Her program, founded in 2008, has trained somewhere in the neighborhood of 5000 people nationally and she is a go-to contact for many institutions looking to start their own program.

Anne graciously met with me for an hour on a Friday night so that I could ask her some more questions. She spoke frankly about the history, aims, and challenges of the program. I was impressed with her nuanced understanding of how search practices reinforce bias, and how she has operationalized this into a program that has the capacity to create deep cultural change. I have posted an excerpt of this interview on the Hiring Librarians blog. What follows is a longer version, which illuminates more of the program’s philosophy, as well as the origins and challenges in measuring outcomes. Her program has found footing in academic libraries, but public and other library types would benefit from understanding her methods.

### **Can you tell us a little bit about the origin of the Search Advocates Training Program?**

Let me first start by saying that in my experience, our beliefs about appropriate search and selection practices are “received wisdom” that people get from the folks who are already at the organization, or from some sort of apocryphal statement from HR that somebody heard at some point, and they tend to be rigid traditions that are very different in different places. So, if you were to go around an institution like OSU to see how different departments hire faculty or staff, each one would have different traditions and practices, and different practices have differing impacts on people and process outcomes.

Everybody believes that their practice is the only practice. And when they’re hired by a department that does anything other than what their department does, they think that department is flawed. So, to begin with, we’ve got a very, very narrow view.

Our former president, Ed Ray, had a practice of meeting annually for a social networking event with the OSU affinity resource group for faculty and staff of color. It's a grassroots organization called the [Association of Faculty and Staff for the Advancement of People of Color](#). In the May 2006 social gathering, he heard a series of anecdotes about search committee meetings and candidate interviews that appalled him. He really cares deeply about diversity and inclusion. And these things that he was hearing about were absolutely in conflict with achieving those goals. So, he said immediately, we need train representatives to serve on search committees and focus on equity, to make sure these things don't happen.

Ed Ray then sent an email to Affirmative Action, which is where I was, and to Academic Affairs, and to Human Resources. Human Resources only had one organizational development person at that point, and they had no capacity to take on more training. Academic Affairs had oversight for faculty development, but was concerned that faculty have very limited time for in-depth training. They said that if we were going to be training faculty, we needed to keep it under three hours. I was worried about the time limit, because I was certain a deeper dive would be needed to create change.

But we did the best we could. We put together a three-hour workshop. We asked a group of "key informants" (equity advocates, primarily people of color and women who had been performing a similar role as part of the cultural taxation they experienced at this predominantly white institution) to come and be our pilot subjects. To be honest, it was pretty embarrassing to present a workshop that felt inadequate to an audience of people who cared deeply about real change. Fortunately (for me) they did not make us go through with the whole workshop - they stopped us about halfway through. They said, "You know, it's better to do nothing than to do something that superficial, because this is disrespectful to the complexity of the problem." That's what we had hoped they would say, and we were relieved.

We didn't want another check the box kind of program, we wanted meaningful change. So, we went back to the drawing board and built out something more complete. It has evolved and lengthened a lot over the years since then.

We offered it first in 2008, to the Extension [Diversity Catalyst Team](#). We got great feedback from them about ways to improve it. And then the recession hit, and nobody was hiring for two years. So, we just made it available to anybody who wanted to attend over the next couple of years. At that time, there was no universally available EDI professional development at OSU, so people were interested in the workshop series for that reason. Meanwhile our Affirmative Action office had spent years cultivating collaborative positive relationships with departments through our involvement in the faculty search and selection process - we had been rigorous but also

helpful (rigorous but not rigid, if that makes sense). So, it was a nice starting point because we were launching with a community that saw us as collaborative, helpful, and principled.

Coming out of the recession, the President and Provost had radically increased enrollment at OSU, which meant that they were able to put forward three hiring initiatives over four years, each of which established at least 25 new tenure lines. Units submitted proposals addressing the criteria for each initiative, and if the tenure line was awarded they were required to include an outside Search Advocate on the search committee. So that was really the first time Advocates were required for specific OSU searches. When the President says “this shall be,” it is a powerful step to launch an initiative, but it doesn’t automatically create a policy. And in fact, at the institutional level, we still don’t have a policy at OSU. There are policies and expectations in all the academic colleges and most administrative divisions. I have mixed feelings about that; I know that if people are using Search Advocates, it’s because somebody in their area believes it’s impactful and important. That’s huge. But it also means that Advocates come into the process at various different times which makes assessment challenging.

### **Will you walk us through how it might work in practice for a Search Advocate to be part of the hiring process?**

We suggest that the Search Advocate should join the process before the job is ever posted. Together with the search committee, they should review the job description and posting for barriers and for opportunities to make it more inclusive and attractive to a wider range of people. They look for unintended messages about who the committee is looking for and other obstacles that may limit the pool.

We have a tool called the Criteria Matrix, which is our primary debiasing tool, an in-depth, inclusive rubric for screening. The Search Committee works together to broaden their understanding of what it means to meet each qualification, while doing justice to the qualification as written and to the needs of the position. We’re essentially setting up a tool that will screen people in instead of screening people out. It’s also prioritizing the qualifications for which we seek strength as a predictor of better performance (beyond just meeting the qualifications), so people will make decisions based on position needs rather than based on feelings of affinity for particular candidates. Strength isn’t a relevant consideration for every qualification.

Advocates are charged to suggest the committee do personal outreach recruiting with a focus on building a more diverse applicant pool. Personal outreach (or network recruiting) always happens, but happens really informally. When it happens informally, we access our usual

networks, and they tend to be very much like us, whoever we are. So, it doesn't really create change.

Then the Search Advocate works with the Search Committee throughout the process. They do everything that the search committee does and more. We've done a lot of thinking about what the bias risks are at each of the stages of the process. Advocates try to front load information and agreements with the committee to build awareness of these bias risks so the committee can be cognizant and think about ways to head those off. The Advocate collaborates with the Search Chair who is responsible for facilitating the search process; if the Advocate wants to bring additional tools or discussion to the process, the Advocate and chair need to plan time for this. I want Advocates to read the applications and ask questions that help committee members test their thinking when they begin the screening process, whether or not they are "voting members."

We want the Advocate to come from far away from the hiring unit, from a different discipline, and be outside the power dynamics, stakeholder relationships, and other complicated relationships within the hiring unit. The mission of the Advocate is to advance equity, validity and diversity in the search and selection process. If they're embedded in the unit, they have some sort of a stake in who's going to be hired, or they're embedded in the power dynamics, or the practices of the unit, or connected in some way to the unit or its stakeholders, they have another interest besides the Search Advocate role, and that becomes a conflict of interest.

In screening, the Advocate is trying to apply the agreed-upon criteria despite not being experts in the subject area; it's a good way to test the clarity of the criteria the committee has developed. If it makes sense to somebody who doesn't know your field, then you've probably done a pretty good job of articulating it in an inclusive, clear sort of way.

I want Search Advocates to be engaged all the way through the process. For every search committee meeting. I want them to be providing tools and resources, but mostly asking a lot of facilitative questions, open ended questions, questions for understanding, and maybe moving into the realm of some more assertive communication, if needed, if they see something that they think is really a problem. Our approach is to use the least power interventions possible. A lot of that starts with things as simple as affirming the things that people are doing well. We want to shape a change in behavior as needed, and we want the Advocate to be a resource for the committee. And so far, that's what we're hearing, that people are appreciative of what the Advocates bring to the process. That it makes the process better for them; it may not be shorter, but it's better.

If we want to create a culture change, then we don't want Advocates to be communicating with people in a way that produces defensiveness or anger. We want them to be collaborative, and to facilitate awareness of the unintended impacts of the practices they've used in the past. I

want Advocates involved in the interviews; they should introduce themselves to the candidates as the Search Advocate. They should be involved in asking questions like everybody else, because otherwise they become a weird looming presence sort of sitting off on the side - everybody thinks that's creepy.

I also want them involved in planning for equity considerations for site visits. Sometimes public presentations, etc. can become problematic if people just ask whatever comes into their heads, whether or not it's actually related to the job. Being expected to field inappropriate questions is a nightmare for candidates. Advocates can help the hiring unit prepare these events such that this is less likely to happen. I suggest that the Advocate or moderator say at the very beginning, "We're all here because we're interested in getting to know this person and their ability to do the job. The focus is on their ability to do the job. But in our desire to make a deeper connection sometimes we ask questions that segue into the personal and we actually can't be doing that. If that happens, it's understandable, but I'm just going to interrupt and ask the candidate not to answer and then move on to a different question." We set it up in such a way that they know what the parameters are, and we also aren't shaming them for asking those questions. Because once you shame people, they get defensive. And people often forget that there are so many limits defining appropriate and inappropriate questions at the interview stage.

After the interviews the search practices vary between units and disciplines. Some search committees are involved in reference checking, some are not. Some submit a written report to the hiring manager, some provide a verbal report, and some just forward a list or recommendation. It's kind of all over the map at that point.

What I want is for the Advocate to be there and paying attention to equity measures all the way through. The equity focus of Advocates is both equity for candidates in the process and equity for committee members, because committee members can sometimes be silenced or their perspectives overlooked. Part of what Advocates are charged to do is to make sure that all those voices are heard, and that the strengths that people bring to the process are being leveraged. Advocates are not rigid, inflexible compliance enforcers; they're not the HR police. They have to recognize nuance, they have to be flexible, they have to be strategic, they have to pick the most important things and not go to the mat for everything, or they lose their audience. And they must be committed to equity and inclusion.

We use a case study—a search committee meeting from an actual land grant institution in another part of the country that took place 10 years ago. The search committee is composed entirely of people from within the academic unit, only tenure track faculty. And nobody addresses the power dynamics in the group. They don't meet for the first time until they've all read

applications, and when they come together to screen, they've built no rubric. There is no standard. They're expected to categorize people into not qualified, qualified, or outstanding, but with no definition of what those things mean. And then their process is kind of gossiping about each candidate, and then cherry picking who they want to advance. So, it's not systematic, it's not equitable. And it's not just people being bad, it's the system, it's the process that allows that to occur. If we want to address cognitive bias, we have to actively engage in changing our systemic processes as well.

I really want people to understand and address examples of systems of privilege and oppression. Particularly in search and selection, we see this showing up as apparently “neutral” norms in policies, procedures, practices, and so on.

### **Neutrality is sometimes considered a core tenant of librarianship, but this idea has really started being interrogated, especially in the last five years or so.**

Neutrality seems like it would be an interesting idea, though difficult to attain given the systems we operate within and the shortcuts our brains use to process information. Striving for neutrality is not the same as recognizing the richness and value of human difference. Whose definition of “neutral” should be used? Then consider the law; it's a tool that's intended to work towards justice, but the legal definition of discrimination is narrow, and the standard of proof is high. So, if we want to be equitable and inclusive and provide better access to people who've been denied access, we have to go well beyond not violating the law.

### **Do you know how many libraries use the program?**

[Orbis Cascade Alliance](#) is having a workshop series that's actually coming up next week. Beyond that, I think most of the librarians I've seen either participate when their institutions have contracted a workshop with OSU, or when the librarians have registered to attend the OSU series individually as our guests. I've seen a real upswing in university librarians, and others who work in libraries. And I've seen that at our institution as well, that there's a real push for and focus on social justice and inclusion that wasn't as clear 10 years ago.

### **Do you know if any participants have been from public libraries? Or are they all academic?**

I may have had one person from a public library, but really not yet. It's a lot to ask someone to participate in a 16-hour workshop series.

## How do you measure the success of the program?

I really don't have data analytics I can use because OSU doesn't have a policy mandating a consistent approach to using the Advocates. Some Advocates enter while the position is still being developed. Others don't join until the committee has already read all the applications. So, it's like comparing apples and elephants.

As context, because there was no policy, we approached this as a culture change initiative, which meant that we were trying to facilitate a change in perspective and a change in basic practices in the context of search and selection. We hoped the new perspectives would extend through the university over time so folks who had never learned about systems of privilege and oppression or implicit bias would be introduced to those concepts and could see how they show up in search and selection. In our experience, people don't want to do things that they know to be unfair, but it can be hard to prove that the established practices have that effect. You need to create a non-blaming, non-judgmental way to point out those effects without making people feel that you're calling them bigots. I've heard from people that the program has created a significant change in the kinds of discourse that goes on within search processes, that it has created different expectations about equity in the process, and that we are at a higher standard. I also hear that it is kind of segueing over into other parts of the institution. People bring their "Advocate lens" wherever they go. My intention with the workshops is to have people leave with this understanding firmly seated in their awareness, so that they can automatically see through that lens even when they aren't trying to. And it's not hard because people self-select into the workshop - they're interested in creating change and advancing equity in the first place.

I'm reluctant to think about demographic measures as being the sole measure of success, because the work that Advocates do is in the middle of the process. Institutions that are really successful at creating demographic change in hiring engage in substantial pipeline efforts, way in advance - before jobs are ever open. Also, the ultimate hiring decision is made by the administrator, and the Advocate has no more ability to influence the administrator than the rest of the search committee members. The Advocate only has the opportunity to advise during the middle part of the process, so it's hard to evaluate impact.

Other institutions that have started from our program and built out their own, have been looking primarily at responses from search committee members to questions like, "What value did you see added to the process from having the Search Advocate present?" So, they've found that more qualitative measures are a good way to recognize growth and change.

Here's my dilemma: I think it's a cop-out for me, a white lady, to say the numbers don't matter. It's not true that I think the numbers don't matter. The numbers do matter. They matter a

lot. My background was in Affirmative Action. But you don't want to judge a program solely on one quantitative metric that isn't fully within that program's reach without also considering qualitative value that may develop over time.

I read some meta analyses done by [NSF ADVANCE](#) programs. They've observed there is no one standalone "silver bullet" program. The institutions that are successful in changing faculty hiring and promotion demographics have a lot of different initiatives happening throughout the institution, including different aspects of the search and selection process. They're working on retention, they're working on pipeline, they're working on organizational culture, they're working on awareness, they're involved in a range of efforts across the institution. Search Advocates are just one tool in the toolkit. I don't see how I can accurately claim the numeric impact I have seen in some of the figures as the accomplishment of the Search Advocate program; we are just part of a range of initiatives at the institution. Correlation is not causation!

**Do you have research or resources that you can recommend that underpin the philosophy of the program? You can of course say no, because librarians are good at creating their own resource lists...**

I pull research and opinion pieces from a variety of disciplines and sources. It's not like I have a research study that says do it this way, and it will work. I'm always looking at what people are trying so I can keep the program current. I've done a lot of reading in social psychology about implicit bias and I'm reading in gender and sexuality and philosophy and ethnic studies, people that do the work about systems of privilege and oppression. I'm looking at those theories, synthesizing them into an applied learning system. And of course, I'm paying attention to the studies about bias in hiring and promotion.

**Do you have any "getting started" recommendations for organizations looking to reduce bias in hiring?**

One of the things that we know is a big problem for search and selection is that we are in a hurry. To improve search and selection, we have to slow down. The only way to change the processes is to approach them more slowly and thoughtfully, and really pay attention.

If an institution were launching a program like [Search Advocates] themselves, I would say they should start by pulling together a team of key people (administration and faculty and so on) that could be involved in piloting. They should be people who will be honest and who also have the respect of the community. The pilot is to see whether you've got it right or whether it's really

not quite what's needed yet. You need to show that you're learning from the pilot experience, continuing to change and grow and evolve to address your particular institutional context.

They also need to bring a focus on being facilitative learning partners and flexible thinking. To do this work, we don't see the world in binaries, we see nuance, and that's a hard thing for people to do – we're conditioned to do the opposite. It's hard for people to use neutral, nonjudgmental, objective language, we are a culture of judgment and judgment words are what flow freely from people's mouths. It's very hard to interrupt.

**There's this thirst for tools. I have a question in my survey that asks, “What does your organization do to reduce bias in hiring? What are the contexts in which discrimination still exists in this process?” Some folks have great answers, some have cursory answers like, “we have a diverse search committee,” and a lot of folks say things like, “I don't know what to do about this” or “I would like to do something, but my boss doesn't want to do anything.”**

It's so hard to create change. If the administration is not a champion of the process, it won't work. We were fortunate that, when we started, our President said, “this shall be.” I would imagine that this program might not launch in quite the same way today; our circumstances are different. Our former President put us on the map by launching the program ahead of its time, so now to some extent we're the go-to place. And so, if we hadn't been positioned that way, OSU wouldn't now be taking the lead. Another institution would have. I think this kind of program was inevitable. Part of the reason our program has remained sustainable is that we developed it at OSU, for OSU, attending to our particular context and challenges. A “one size fits all” kind of approach isn't terribly popular in this environment.

It's a big undertaking. And it's an especially big undertaking in higher education; the way that the so-called merit and reward systems are structured in higher education really does not acknowledge the importance of this kind of work. Equity work may be recognized as service, but the kind of university service that doesn't count very much compared to other kinds of service to the discipline. So, for faculty the P&T systems can serve as incentives not to engage in this work. For this reason, OSU changed our promotion and tenure guidelines to recognize the importance of equity work in teaching, research, and service back in 2016. Most recently institutions like UIUC (University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign) are setting new standards by mandating that equity work be included as a separate category in faculty position descriptions and be evaluated separately as another component of faculty work (in addition to teaching, research, and service).

**You're making me think of the people who say, "We should run the library like a business." There's this focus on the bottom line and it really, really doesn't have to be that way.**

There's a moral problem with that. It's like the "business case" for diversity, that diversity is only worth doing if it changes the bottom line. Absolutely not. And libraries, like public institutions of higher education, are about providing access to people who otherwise would not have it. That's hugely important, especially in a society that's as stratified with discrimination and barriers as we are in the US. Organizations like libraries are absolutely crucial.

**Yes, as long as they actually are about access. We have failed at that (I'm thinking for example of John Lewis' famous story about being denied a library card in the 50s) and continue to fall short. Libraries are still also institutions that reinforce cultural norms by being "neutral."**

Right - such as the norm of libraries needing to be quiet places! Generationally, that's not going to work very well, that libraries have to be quiet. That's not helping you. It's a culture that operates to judge people who aren't quiet as "inappropriate" or "unprofessional". It's hard to have the time and perspective to recognize these impacts in the moment, but they are reflections of a particular cultural norm that makes some feel unwelcome.

**That's one aspect of your program that I think is so interesting. The Search Advocate is not from the department and is this outsider who's there to ask questions.**

And you can ask the "ignorant person" question, the question that nobody in the discipline would ever dare to ask because they would be thought to be ridiculous. You come from a completely different field, and you can say, "I don't know anything about your field. So, this might be a ridiculous question. But what do you think about this?" And sometimes that just sets people back on their heels because it's something they've never thought about before.

Higher Ed institutions, in particular, like to really puff up their qualifications about communication - "superb oral and written communication." I would argue that what we need across the board is effective communication skills, and that is communication in which people ensure that their message is fully understood by the person with whom they're communicating, or they rephrase it until it is accurately understood. Effective communication is also effective listening; a good listener asks questions until they're certain they understand and that communication is accurate. That's a much harder thing than using pretty big words in nice fluid sentences.

**This has been really wonderful talking to you. I really appreciate your time. And I would like to learn more!**

Absolutely. I would love to have you in the class.

**Emily Weak** ([emilyweak@gmail.com](mailto:emilyweak@gmail.com)) is a Community Engagement and Library Projects Consultant and the creator of the Hiring Librarians blog.

**Published:** July 2022