

Jill Livingston and Lynne Stahl

It's Time to Bag Candidate Dinners

Why Even "Informal" Meals Can Compromise the Search Process

Ostensibly, candidate dinners benefit both applicants and search committees. Candidates, who may travel great distances to interview, can share a friendly meal with members of the committee and/or other faculty and staff. The unstructured setting provides opportunities for candidates to learn about the geographical area, local color, and also a few personalities. A good dining experience might make a hugely favorable impression on a candidate weighing multiple offers. The search committee too realizes advantages, as they have the opportunity to assess a candidate's interpersonal skills outside of the strictures of formal interviews.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that librarianship is a caring profession, search committee members are often uncomfortable with the thought of leaving candidates to fend for themselves at mealtimes. However, precisely because dinners provide an opportunity for "casual" conversation, lifestyle and other personal topics are on the table. Despite the efforts many libraries are taking to institute more inclusive hiring practices, personal information unrelated to the candidate's ability to perform the job for which they are applying will be revealed over dinner. This information makes candidates vulnerable to search committee member biases, particularly the halo bias, whereby the negative or positive impressions they leave during the meal imprint and are extrapolated to unrelated contexts—that is, their overall suitability for the position.

Consider also the following exposures from an anthropological and sociological perspective:

Cuisine: Although the colloquial use of the word focuses on prepared food, an individual's cuisine preferences encompass what a person eats, how they prepare and season it, and lastly how they serve and consume it.¹ Notwithstanding individual variances, cuisine behaviors and preferences take root literally from birth and hinge largely on factors such as culture and socioeconomic status.² Many search committees rightfully acknowledge that they should not be privy to information about socioeconomic status, culture, or ethnicity, yet at a shared meal, individuals will inevitably reveal habits and tastes associated with precisely those aspects of their identity. Furthermore, the judgments people make consciously are merely a fraction of their overall susceptibilities and impressions. Did you know, for instance, that many people associate vegetarianism primarily with white people?³

Morality: Ever notice how we describe foods in moralistic terms? Why is chocolate cake "sinful," while a perfectly ripe apple is not? Why are we being "good" when we stick to restrictive diets, and "oh so bad" when we eat a sundae? Our language around food can manifest our deeper biases. Those who eat "healthy, nonfattening foods versus unhealthy, fattening

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ones” are not only considered more moral but also are perceived to be more fit and trim.⁴ This consideration is particularly important given that implicit weight bias persists, even as other biases have attenuated.⁵

Affinity: Social occasions, such as meals, quickly become sites of affinity bias. For example, you might discover over dinner that you and one candidate share a deep passion for skiing, the Marvel Comics Universe, or ice cream. These common interests can lead some to become more positively disposed toward the candidate despite none of those interests having anything to do with the job.

Gendered standards and associations: Not only do we conflate meal sizes with morality, but we also judge women who eat lightly as more attractive and feminine. Eating daintily is considered sex-role-appropriate behavior for women,⁶ while on the other hand, meat is considered the domain of the masculine.⁷

Medical concerns: Food choices are more layered for those with certain health conditions, such as diabetes, celiac, or Crohn’s disease. Now too we know that nausea and dulled appetite are common side effects of increasingly popular semaglutide drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy.⁸ Moreover, those with anorexia or bulimia may find food choices and eating inordinately taxing,⁹ so any shared meal—let alone one shared within the context of assessment—is a fraught meal.

Other considerations: Because cuisine choices are cultural, familial, and personal, preferences play out across many dimensions and forks (pun intended). Reflect on the variety of diets a candidate may adhere to: calorie restriction, vegan, paleo, kosher, halal, and so on. Consider regional restaurant differences just within the United States and how these differences may or may not be positive for limited eaters. What about the experience of a recovering alcoholic whose companions order wine or religious practices that may define not only foods but also timing of meals? Knowledge of which fork to use, where to put one’s napkin, or how to dispose of olive pits is all socioeconomically and culturally contingent etiquette. Finally, we must acknowledge the fact that “optional” attendance at a candidate meal is not truly a choice for candidates concerned about maximizing their appeal.

Because of the high stakes, articles and websites that purport to guide candidates on the interview dinner abound. They prescribe what to order (small bites that can be eaten neatly) and what not to (spaghetti or alcohol). Some advise candidates to procure food to eat on their own, as they should not expect to eat during their interview meal. These guides also go into detail about what to talk about and how to act. Candidates can learn etiquette tips related to place settings and that to “leave the table during a meal, they should say only, ‘Please excuse me for a moment.’”¹⁰ However, should candidates need to learn these things if the true purpose of an interview is to assess their knowledge, skills, and attributes in a given role? What do hiring committees truly gain from meals? Maybe it’s time to bag the candidate dinner because in foregrounding sociability, a free meal can come at a very steep price for the candidate. ≡

Notes

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