

1 of 1 DOCUMENT

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Before Starting a Faculty Search, Take a Good Look at the Search Committee

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Across the country, campuses are engaged in efforts to diversify the racial and ethnic makeup of their faculties to help prepare their students for a diverse society. But the search committees charged with this task often approach their task in a passive, routine way.

Many committees create a job description that would attract faculty members much like themselves. They advertise the position in publications that people mostly like themselves read. They evaluate résumés of people who often resemble themselves, invite three to five candidates for campus interviews who -- again -- are similar to themselves, and then make an offer to the person with whom they are most comfortable. Over time that process has inevitably resulted in campuses that are more homogeneous than not.

Search committees must go beyond business as usual to attract people of color. They should take a number of steps before, during, and after the search, as I describe in *Diversifying the Faculty*, a guidebook that I wrote for the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Based on my research as well as my experience consulting with search-committee chairs, I recommend that colleges:

Broaden the composition of search committees. Involving people with different points of view provides multiple perspectives from which to judge candidates. When possible, people of color -- faculty members, administrators, students, or community members -- should serve on the committee. If a college has too few faculty members of color, it should explore creative alternatives. Some departments, for example, have invited and successfully incorporated doctoral students of color; colleagues from a nearby historically black college, Hispanic-serving institution, or tribal college; and scholars of color from neighboring institutions or disciplinary associations to serve on their search committees.

Write a position statement that truly attracts diverse applicants. Search committees must go further than the words printed on most job descriptions: "We are an Equal Opportunity Employer." They should review job descriptions from other institutions that have been successful in hiring faculty members of color and incorporate similar wording in their own job descriptions. Some examples of wording that signal campus and department interest in diverse perspectives include:

- * A record of scholarship in areas related to diversity.
- * Experience with a variety of teaching methods or curricular perspectives.
- * Previous experience interacting with communities of color.
- * Interest in developing and implementing curricula that address multicultural issues.
- * Demonstrated success in working with diverse populations of students.

Encourage search-committee members to go beyond their comfort zones. It is understandable that faculty members want to work with people who feel familiar to them. But in the hiring process, faculty members who are more open to

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others -- even people who might make them uncomfortable -- are more likely to achieve the goal of hiring new colleagues with diverse experiences and perspectives. The search committee should discuss how candidates will be assessed and then focus on how to broaden the candidate pool and avoid arbitrarily eliminating viable candidates.

For example, potential faculty candidates are often eliminated first on the basis of their graduate schools, with highest rankings going to candidates from the most-elite universities. Until there is parity for student enrollment by race and ethnicity across all types of campuses, where a candidate went to graduate school should not be the primary reason for eliminating him or her from the search process.

Make more of the campus visit. During their visit, candidates are evaluating the university even as they are being evaluated. That is the perfect opportunity for the search committee to share information that demonstrates the commitment of the college or university to inclusiveness and diversity. At the same time, search-committee members must present accurate information about the position, campus environment, and collegial expectations.

The search committee can also help the candidates identify professional networks in their potential new environment. Since such networks should not be limited by race or ethnicity, scheduling meetings with both majority and minority faculty members who have similar scholarly interests can be useful -- and especially important when there are small numbers of faculty of color in the field or discipline of the potential hire.

Carefully negotiate the compensation package. If managed poorly, discussions about compensation can undermine all of the search committee's previous efforts. Faculty members of color have described, for example, their frustration and sense of betrayal upon discovering that they were hired at a much lower salary than others were, or that all conditions in the final letter of agreement were not upheld according to their understanding.

Colleges should use such discussions to attract, not discourage, diverse candidates. For example, a new hire received a follow-up call from a dean indicating that her salary would be increased because another new hire had negotiated a higher salary. Other higher-education institutions have provided a general publication to help educate all finalists on what can be negotiated in an offer. Such steps speak volumes to candidates about the equity considerations of a department and its campus.

Evaluate and follow up. Colleges should review the effectiveness of their search processes within the specific contexts of their departments or institutions. In addition, colleges should regularly follow up with a new faculty member of color soon after he or she is hired, especially if that person is the first or only person of his or her race or ethnicity in the department. That helps ease the transition and may uncover any issues that may have developed in the first few months.

Create diverse communication networks. While formal search processes can be documented, many undocumented, informal processes take place that may determine the outcome of a search. In my workshops, a typical observation made by search-committee members is, "We do not have anyone to call for information on how to identify and locate potential minority candidates in order to encourage their application." Cold calls are then made to those who might have such information. If such cold calls are necessary, continuous contact and communication with people of color, both on and off the campus, has not been established.

Those charged with faculty hiring must cultivate a variety of contacts that are already in place before faculty openings occur. For example, some faculty members describe how they keep in touch with their own successful graduates of color. Those alumni may return to their institution for a position or recommend other talented scholars for consideration. Most important, such efforts to stay in contact, even when no position is open, reflect the institution's continuing interest in the scholarly and programmatic contributions made by diverse scholars and educators.

Consider special interventions. Colleges can use strategic hiring interventions to circumvent some of the usual search processes -- especially those that can typically take as long as a year to complete. Such interventions include: spousal hires, waivers and exceptions to advertising or recruitment requirements, and "cluster hires" -- hiring more than one faculty member at a time with similar scholarly interests. For example, a study sponsored by the Spencer Foundation of all faculty hires over three years at three major research universities found that interventions were used to hire faculty members from all racial and ethnic backgrounds. And those interventions, combined with job descriptions indicating that the institution was committed to diversity, were crucial in the hiring of even a few African-American, American Indian, and Hispanic faculty members.

Higher education has taken important steps in hiring faculty members of color, but giant leaps are needed to achieve the academic excellence that diversification of the faculty can bring. Search-committee processes remain crucial factors in fostering institutional commitment to racial and ethnic diversity in the professoriate.

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