Faculty Hiring: Best Practices for Search Committees

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1. Introduction

The UD ADVANCE Institute has as its broad goal diversifying and strengthening University of Delaware’s (UD’s) faculty. Originally funded by a National Science Foundation (NSF) ADVANCE Institutional Transformation award, the Institute's research-driven initiatives aim to increase the representation of under-represented faculty and to support a campus climate conducive to the retention and advancement of all faculty. Towards these ends, this manual is a resource for faculty search committees that outlines research-based best practices for hiring excellent and diverse faculty members.

![Graph showing the number of women faculty in the School of Science at MIT (1960-2010), (Revised from Hopkins, MIT Faculty News Letter, no. 4, vol. XVIII, 2006.)](Image)
Evidence that recruiting for excellence is not orthogonal to diversity can be found in a longitudinal case study on the representation of women STEM faculty at MIT. The figure above shows the number of women faculty in MIT’s School of Sciences from 1960 to 2010. Notice that prior to 1972, there were only one or two women in the School of Science. That number rose from 1972-75 due to the passage of Title IX. However, the increases that occurred in association with Title IX eventually became the “new normal” and the number of women faculty reached a plateau. A second increase occurred from 1997-2000, followed by another plateau. What caused this second increase and subsequent plateau? In 1996, a group of senior women faculty provided their Dean (Birgeneau) with evidence of gender-based inequities. After a detailed equity study confirmed their concerns, the Dean worked to improve equity and to recruit more women faculty in the School of Sciences. These increases came to an end when Dean Birgeneau left MIT in 2000. Follow-up research on research productivity and professional status showed that the women hired in the School of Sciences were as successful as the men. Lessons learned from this study are threefold:

- **Leadership is critical.**
- **Efforts to diversify must be active and ongoing.**
- **Diversity and excellence can go hand in hand.**

The remainder of this manual is organized around the search committee process. Sections 2-4 focus on the early stages of the search. Sections 5-7 focus on the processes leading up to, and including, the virtual and campus interviews. The final section gives suggestions on the offer and beyond. Appendices take a deeper look into certain steps in the process and provide specific tools and policies that will help search committees along the way.

2. **Before the Search**

Before the search process begins, there are steps that a department can take to help support productive and effective search processes. For example,

- **The department should have regular discussions about faculty hiring priorities.**
  
  - Keep priorities broad to allow for more flexibility at other stages in the process.
  
    **Example:** If the department has needs in more than one area, consider phrasing a hiring requestion in terms of a need in “area A or area B.” It may be the case that the department later decides to focus on one of these areas, but this can be adjusted when writing the job ad.
  
  - Avoid thinking in terms of replacing a specific departed faculty member. Think of hiring as an opportunity to build the department in a desired direction.

- **Cultivate a pipeline of potential candidates, even in years when you are not hiring.**
  
  - Establish a tradition of faculty attending disciplinary meetings and reporting back on attendees who may be good potential hires. Be sure to make note of academically excellent scholars who are under-represented in their field.
  
  - Invite potential candidates to give a talk in your department, even if they’re not yet looking for jobs.
3. Writing the Job Advertisement

The language of the job advertisement can make a difference to who does and does not apply. Studies show, for example, that women are less likely than men to apply for positions in which they do not see themselves as an excellent fit.¹ Special attention should be given to creating a description that is likely to yield an inclusive pool of candidates.

- Develop a broad definition of the position, desired experience, disciplinary background, etc.
  - Early in the search process, committee members should discuss and agree on 5-6 criteria for evaluating candidates. See Appendix C. Tips for Creating Evaluation Tools for Faculty Searches
  - Be clear about what is required and what is preferred. To ensure a deep and diverse pool, when appropriate, use “preferred” instead of “required,” “should” instead of “must,” etc., when describing qualifications and developing criteria.
- Incorporate diversity and inclusion language in the job advertisement.
  - Find out if your unit has required or recommended language and act accordingly.
  - You may also want to include more specific language to convey departmental priorities around diversity, such as:
    “The department is interested in candidates who can teach or mentor a diverse student population.”
    “The department seeks candidates who can address diversity and equity in research and teaching.”
  - If the search committee plans to require that all applicants submit a diversity statement, specific diversity goals should be discussed and highlighted in the job ad. See Appendix A: The Use of Diversity Statements in Faculty Hiring.
- Consider mentioning UD’s family-friendly policies and procedures. For example:
  “A recipient of a NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation award, UD has a service to assist dual-career couples and supports work-life balance through family-friendly policies.”
  To reach a diversity of applicants, be sure to distribute the ad widely.

4. The Initial Committee Meeting

Schedule the first committee meeting as early in the process as possible. This will leave time to actively recruit strong candidates and allow plenty of time for fair and thorough evaluation. It may also increase your chances of making an early and successful offer. Below is a list of topics to be covered at the first meeting.

- Clarify the charge of the committee.
  - Is it to provide a ranked list of finalists for a departmental vote?

- Is it to identify which candidates to bring to campus?
- Etc.

- Overview the main steps of the search process and establish a broad timeline.
  - Application deadline.
  - Deciding on the long-short list.
  - Conducting virtual interviews.
  - Campus visits.
  - Making the offer.

- Discuss specific roles and duties played by individual committee members such as the role of the search committee chair, the role(s) played by members acting as representatives of specific programs, etc.

- Decide how decisions will be made -- e.g., consensus or by majority vote?

- Decide whether absentee votes will be allowed.

- Establish ground rules surrounding confidentiality; be clear on who may or may not contact candidates and under what conditions.

- Discuss active recruitment and plan steps to deepen the pool. You will need to submit information on this step via Talent Link
  
  - See Appendix B: Active Recruitment of Faculty Candidates

- Create an evaluation tool based on agreed upon criteria for creating the long-short list. You will need to submit information on this step before the finalist pool is approved.
  
  - See Appendix C: Tips for Creating Evaluation Tools for Faculty Searches

5. Fair Evaluation of Candidates

Cognitive shortcuts are a tool that our brains use to filter, sort, and analyze information to help us solve problems, make quick decisions, and so forth. Often these decisions are trivial (e.g., what to have for lunch) and cognitive shortcuts do no harm. However, cognitive shortcuts can sometimes cause us to make incorrect decisions – as, for example, when they are based on stereotypes – and can lead to biased outcomes.

Bias in selection processes is well documented in the social science literature. Here are some examples:

- Researchers in Sweden conducted a systematic review of actual applications for a prestigious postdoctoral fellowship after noticing that women tended to receive a significantly small proportion of the awards compared to men. After controlling for research accomplishment, the study found that the review panel scores for women applicants were far lower than those of male
applicants. Indeed, women applicants had to be 2.5 times as productive to have received the same rating as men applicants from the fellowship review board.²

- A study asked 127 STEM faculty to evaluate an application materials for an undergraduate lab manager position. A single application was used, but half of the time it contained a typical male name and half of the time it contained a typical female name. The faculty (both men and women) rated applicants with a male name as more competent and more hirable than applicants with a female name. Moreover, the faculty would offer the male candidate more mentoring and more salary than the female candidate.³

- A follow-up study asked 251 physics and biology faculty from 8 large public research universities to evaluate an application for a postdoctoral research position in their field. The same CV was used, but the name varied to by gender and by race-ethnicity. Findings indicate that physics faculty show a preference for male candidates over female and for Caucasian and Asian candidates over Black and Latinx ones. Biology faculty showed preference for Asian candidates over Black and Latinx candidates.⁴

Members of search committees are tasked with processing a lot of information in a short amount of time in order to make decision. This is exactly the type of setting in which our brains tend to fall back on cognitive shortcuts. However, the decisions we are making when we evaluate faculty candidates are too important to risk errors and bias. The good news is we can structure our evaluation process to minimize the impact of cognitive shortcuts. In fact, as a result of the Swedish postdoc study described above, the sponsoring agency strategically overhauled its postdoctoral fellowship review process in accordance with a variety of best practices (many of which can be found below). Follow up research indicates that as a consequence of these changes, the agency has largely achieved gender parity in awarding fellowships.⁵

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Evaluate all applicants based upon the criteria you agreed upon as a committee during your first committee meeting.

Create an evaluation tool for each committee member to use to record ratings and comments about the candidates.

*See Appendix C: Tips for Creating Evaluation Tools for Faculty Searches*

Each committee member should review applications independently. To avoid influencing one another, avoid conversations about candidates before the committee meeting for creating the long-short list.

In some cases, committee chairs may request evaluation summaries on each candidate be submitted before the long-short list meeting.

Bring your completed evaluation tool to the committee meeting when you discuss candidates. Reference it in the discussion, to keep people focused on common standards of evaluation.

### Effects of Pandemic on Applicants

- The COVID-19 pandemic has affected different people differently.
- Early research indicates that women and people of color have been especially impacted by the pandemic (add citations)
- We will soon see the effects of pandemic working conditions in applications for faculty positions
- Expect to see wide ranges of productivity (potentially higher highs and lower lows)
- Develop a plan for how to take pandemic considerations into account in your evaluation of candidates.

### 6. Creating the Long-Short List & Virtual Interviews

Once each committee member has had time to review each candidate according to previously agreed upon evaluation criteria, the search committee will meet to create a long-short list. This is a semi-finalist pool of candidates (~ 8-12) that the committee will interview virtually. This pool must be approved through Talent Link by the Department Chair and Dean prior to the start of the virtual interviews.

*Here are some tips on how to create a semi-finalist pool of candidates.*

- Each committee member shares the candidates that they evaluated as *yes* and as *no*.
- Keep or drop those candidates in which there is consensus. In the absence of consensus, err on the side of keeping a candidate.
- Carefully discuss the remaining candidates. Refer to the committee’s developed criteria/evaluation tool in the discussion.
- Loop back to see if you missed anyone, especially if your long-short list is not diverse.
If the semi-finalist list is too long, carefully discuss which candidates should be cut and why. Again, keep the conversation focused on the committee’s agreed-upon criteria. Follow the “search committee general practices” listed above.

Avoid the Slippery Slope

- It is not uncommon for evaluation criteria to shift in the process of the search.
- Sometimes this occurs to accommodate a preferred candidate but can occur for other reasons as well.
- To avoid this, verify that the committee is using mutually agreed upon criteria. Refer back to these criteria throughout the discussion of candidates.
- Sometimes discussion reveals a need to adjust evaluation criteria. This is okay as long as the adjustments fit with agreed upon hiring priorities and are not an ad hoc means of accommodating a preferred candidate.

Virtual Interviews.

Once the committee has settled on a long-short list, committees often rely on virtual interviews (or phone calls) to evaluate these candidates. To help ensure fair evaluation at this step of the process, consider the following practices:

- Use your agreed-upon selection criteria to help you structure a core set of interview questions.
- Use the same core questions for all candidates. Bias can be reduced with structured interviews and common questions.
- Use best practices in conducting virtual interviews.

See Appendix D: Conducting A Good Virtual Interview

7. Creating the Finalist Pool & Campus Visits

The finalist pool is the set of candidates (~3-4) to be invited for campus interviews. The finalist pool must be reviewed and approved by the administration prior to the start of campus visits. The committee will need to submit two pieces of information at this stage:

1. **Describe the process or evaluation tool(s) used to evaluate candidates,**
2. **Describe the active steps taken to create a diverse and highly qualified applicant pool.**

Do not contact any candidates before the finalist pool has been approved. In addition, the committee will likely want to create a new set of evaluation criteria at this stage. These criteria should be consistent with the job description and should be based on the expectations related to research, teaching, and service. It is also important for the committee to agree on the relative importance of the different criteria.

Campus Interviews

When it comes to campus interviews, keep in mind that the candidates are evaluating your department and UD as much as you are evaluating them. **Below are some planning steps to take prior to help**
ensure a smooth campus visit.
- Review accessibility accommodations offered through UD’s Office of Disability Support Services and communicate these options to each candidate.
- Ask whether the candidate would like to meet with people in other departments or social circles.
- When creating the candidate’s on campus schedule, avoid over or under-scheduling.
- Create a welcome packet with the following types of information:
  - Departmental graduate and undergraduate programs.
  - Departmental policies related to mentoring, etc.
  - UD ADVANCE Resources: Family Friendly & Dual Career Brochures (visit the UD ADVANCE website or contact ADVANCE for copies).

Once the candidates are on campus...
- Keep in mind that some questions are not appropriate during an interview. A good rule of thumb is to stick to professional (not social) content in one’s discussions with the candidate.
  See Appendix E. Interview Questions to Avoid
- Reduce the influence of unconscious bias by keeping the interviews structured and similar. Consider, for example, using common questions for each candidate. This does not preclude unstructured discussion or individualized questions
- All committee members, and ideally all faculty, should meet with each candidate and should attend each candidate’s job talk.
  - Consider videotaping the job talk for those faculty members who are unable to attend.
- Create a questionnaire for each faculty member to fill out, a standardized evaluative feedback to be sent to the committee immediately after each visit.
- When the campus visits are over and it is time to vote on and discuss candidates, be sure to avoid the slippery slope (as referenced above).

8. Closing the Deal & Beyond
The work of the search committee does not end when you turn over the committee/department recommendation to the chair/dean. Now that you have found the best candidate for your position, you want to make sure that they get an offer and that they accept your offer. Here are some suggestions for how the search committee can remain involved:
- Keep updated on the progress of the offer.
  Is it moving along in a timely manner? Is the candidate receiving all needed information?
- Support your candidate’s negotiations for success.
  Dual career? Start-up? Etc.
- When the candidate accepts the offer, welcome your new colleague to UD. If s/he is an assistant professor, consider checking with the department chair to make sure a formal mentor is assigned before the semester begins. It is never too early to start mentoring a new colleague to success!