Faculty Hiring: Best Practices for Search Committees

Last Updated. 9.4.19

Table of Contents
1. Introduction
2. Before the Search
3. Writing the Job Advertisement
4. The Initial Committee Meeting
5. Fair Evaluation of Candidates
6. Creating the Long-Short List & Virtual Interviews
7. Creating the Short-Short List & Campus Interviews
8. Closing the Deal & Beyond

Appendix A: The Use of Diversity Statements in Faculty Hiring
Appendix B: Active Recruitment of Faculty Candidates
Appendix C: Tips for Creating Evaluation Tools for Faculty Searches
Appendix D: Conducting A Good Virtual Interview
Appendix E: Interview Questions to Avoid

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, UD ADVANCE’s research-driven program provides resources and support to UD’s faculty and administrators aimed at increasing the representation, retention, and advancement of faculty who are under-represented in their field. It also works to support a campus climate conducive to the success 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.

Successful faculty searches are those that not only satisfy the needs and aspirations of one’s department and the University, but also result in hiring faculty who will excel at UD. Faculty hiring is a major investment of faculty time and university money. A successful hire can enhance department morale, can enhance the department’s national and international visibility, and enhance departmental programming.
Evidence that recruiting for excellence and diversity often goes hand in hand can be found in a longitudinal case study on the representation of women faculty in the School of Sciences at MIT. The figure above shows the number of women faculty in MIT’s School of Sciences from 1960 to 2010. Prior to 1971, there were only one or two women faculty in the School of Sciences. In only a three-year period (1972-1975) that number rose to ~22, but then plateaued for nearly 20 years. A second increase occurred from 1997-2000, followed by another plateau. What caused these increases? In 1972 Title IX was passed as a follow-up to passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title IX requires equal access for women at educational institutions receiving federal support. In 1996, a group of women faculty in the School of Sciences provided the Dean with evidence of gender-based inequities in resources and support. After a detailed equity study confirmed their concerns, the Dean worked to remedy the inequities and to enhance recruitment of women faculty. The second plateau occurred when this Dean left MIT in 2000. What are some key takeaways from this case study?

- *Excellence is not orthogonal to diversity.*
  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.

- *Leadership is critical.*
  It took the heft of the Federal Government, and then of the Dean, to support and to steer the faculty into choosing an excellent and diverse selection of faculty.

- *Efforts to diversify must be active and ongoing.*
  The increases that occurred in association with Title IX became the “new normal”. Consequently, further increases in the number of women faculty stalled. It took a Dean’s active intervention in 1997 to disrupt the new normal and, once again, apply active efforts to recruit for diverse and excellent faculty.

---

This manual is largely organized around the search committee process. Sections 2-4 focus on the early stages of the search (writing the job advertisement, initial committee meetings, and broadening the pool of candidates). Section 5 gives tips on how to fairly evaluate faculty candidates. Sections 6 and 7 focus on the processes leading up to, and including, the virtual and campus interviews. The final section, section 8, gives suggestions on following up 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

There are things that Departments can do before the search process begins to help support a productive and effective search process. For example,

- The department should have regular and ongoing discussions about faculty hiring priorities.
  - It is helpful to keep priorities broad as this will allow for more flexibility at other stages in the hiring process.
  - Example: If the department has needs in more than one area, consider phrasing the request as “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 certain retired or departed faculty member. Think of your hiring as an opportunity to build the department in a desired direct.
- Cultivate a pipeline of potential candidates, even in years when you are not hiring.
  - Establish a departmental tradition of faculty attending national and international 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 the field.
  - Invite potential candidates to give seminars in your department during the year, 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.² For this reason and others, special attention should be given to creating a description that is likely to yield a wide and inclusive pool of candidates. For example,

- Develop a broad definition of the position, desired experience, disciplinary background, etc.
  - Be clear about what is really required and what is preferred. Search committees should

consider only those candidates that meet all of the required qualifications. 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 college or department has required or recommended language and act accordingly.
  - In addition, you may 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 job applicants submit a diversity statement, instructions for what to include in that statement should be part of 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 an NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation award, UD has services 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 in the first meeting.

- Clarify the charge of the committee.
  - Is it to provide a ranked list of finalists for a departmental vote?
  - Is it simply 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, either by consensus or by voting. If the latter, decide whether absentee votes will be allowed.
- Establish ground rules surrounding confidentiality and be clear on who may or may not contact candidates and under what conditions.
- Discuss active recruitment and plan steps to deepen the pool.
  - See Appendix B: Active Recruitment of Faculty Candidates
  - Important: You will need to submit information on this step via Talent Link.
- 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

Our brains constantly receive and handle an overwhelming flow of information. Cognitive shortcuts are a tool that our brains use to filter, sort, and analyze information to help us solve problems and make quick decisions. Often these decisions are trivial (e.g., what to have for lunch) and cognitive shortcuts do no harm. However, cognitive shortcuts can cause us to make incorrect decisions based on stereotypes, which in turn can lead to biased outcomes. Bias in selection processes is well documented in social science literature. Here are only a few 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. The study discovered bias in the review process. The review panel scores for women applicants was far lower than that of male applicants of equivalent research accomplishments. In particular, women applicants had to be 2.5 times as productive to have received the same rating as men applicants from the fellowship review board3.
- A study asked STEM faculty to evaluate applications for an undergraduate lab manager position. All CVs provided were identical, except that some had a male name and some had a 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 candidate4.
- A follow-up study asked physics and biology faculty to evaluate applications for a postdoctoral research position in their field. This time the CVs were identical except they had different names to suggest not only candidate gender, but also race/ethnicity. Physics faculty showed preference

---
for male candidates over female and for White and Asian candidates over Black and Latinx. Biology faculty showed preference for Asian candidates over Black and Latinx\(^5\).

When we are on a search committee we are tasked to process a lot of information in a short amount of time in order to make decisions. This is exactly the type of setting in which our brains revert to the ease of relying on cognitive shortcuts. However, the decisions we are making when we evaluate faculty candidates are too important to risk errors and bias, like the ones evidenced in the studies described above.

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 of the fellowships strategically overhauled their review processes for all their postdoctoral fellowships and as a result they achieved gender parity in awarding fellowships\(^6\). Here are strategies that can be used when evaluating applications in order to ensure fairness and achieve the highest quality results:

**Optimize Conditions for Evaluation**

- *Minimize distractions such as exhaustion, hunger, and competing activities.*
  Distractions increase the probability of defaulting to intuitive, often unjustified, conclusions.
- *Mix up the order in which committee members review applications.*
  For example, some can sort applications by name from A to Z and others from Z to A. Others can review in the order submitted. Etc. The idea is to make sure each application is reviewed by at least one fresh set of eyes.

- 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 each other, don’t have side conversations about candidates before the committee meeting for creating the long shortlist.
- 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.

### 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 if you need to defend one of your favored candidates. This will keep the conversation on track relative to the agreed-upon criteria.
◦ 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 on p. 4 (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 interview questions.
◦ Use the same 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 Department Chair, Dean, and Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs 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.

The committee will likely want to create a more refined 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 important for the committee to agree on the relative importance of the different criteria.

**Campus Interviews**

When it comes to campus interviews, it is important to 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 the campus visit. For each candidate...*

- 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.
- Be mindful when creating the candidate’s on campus schedule.
  - Strike a balance between over and 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 of the following brochures.
    - Dual Career Services at University of Delaware
    - Family-Friendly Policies for Faculty at University of Delaware

*Once the candidates are on campus...*

- Keep in mind that some questions are not appropriate to ask during an interview, such as those that delve into a person’s personal life. A good rule of thumb in this regard is to stick to professional and not social content in one’s discussions with the candidate.

UD’s Office of Human Resources has a relevant resource in this regard.

*See Appendix 3. 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.
Note: 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).

**Dual Career**

- Candidates will often have a partner who also needs a job in the area.
- You may not ask if this is a consideration; however, the candidate may volunteer this information.
- During the interview, make sure candidates receive info on UD’s dual-career assistance (UD ADVANCE can supply brochures).
- If a dual-career request comes up, being able to act quickly makes a big difference.

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.  
  Are thing happening in a timely manner? Is the candidate receiving all the information that he or she needs?
- Support your candidate’s negotiations for success.  
  For example, dual career? Start-up? Etc.

Finally, when the candidate accepts the offer, welcome your new colleague to UD. If the new hire 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!