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Advice to deans, department heads and search committees for recruiting diverse faculty (opinion)

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Search committees often express frustration about the limitations of their applicant pool -- in many fields the job applicants are not diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, and in some fields few women apply. Departments can't hire people who don't apply: if minorities and women aren't in the pool, they can't become potential colleagues.

Ensuring a broad and diverse pool of applicants is an important goal for institutions and their search committees. So how can they change the features of the pool, especially in a field in which men and/or white people are numerically dominant? Based on our long-term experience and substantial research, we recommend that deans, department chairs and search committees members consider the following general suggestions.

Define the position in broad terms. A good place to start is with the definition of the position. If the job is defined in narrow terms -- a common strategy in many faculty hires -- it will focus on a single research area within a discipline or subfield and require use of particular methods. It may also dictate specific courses to be taught. Here's a typical example of this type of faculty advertisement:

The Department of Psychology at Terrific University is seeking an assistant professor with a promising program of research in the area of stigma and stereotyping in social psychology. The successful applicant will not only demonstrate excellence in this research area but also be able to teach courses in Social Psychology, Prejudice and Discrimination, and Attitude Change.

Every narrow qualification that is specified will lead some potential applicants to select themselves *out* of the pool of possible applicants, stimulating a process of self-evaluation of fit that will lead to a pool that is less diverse. Thus, if women and underrepresented minority potential job applicants, more often than white men, conclude, "I am not what they are looking for" or "I am not qualified" when reviewing the required qualifications for a position, our applicant pools may be unnecessarily homogeneous.

Provide cues of belonging. If we hope to attract a wide range of applicants, we should describe our jobs in the broadest terms that are accurate -- for example, by listing several alternative topics or approaches -- and offer a range of courses that might be taught rather than a specific and limited set. For example:

The Department of Psychology at Terrific University is seeking an assistant professor with a promising program of research in any area. The successful applicant will not only demonstrate excellence in this research area but will be able to teach courses appealing to undergraduates both in that area and in broader domains of psychology.

Cues of belonging -- or not belonging -- can also be conveyed by gendered language in job advertisements, such as the use of *dominant* instead of *excellent*. In a test in a laboratory setting, where the same job can be described in different terms, the use of “masculine” words for an administrative assistant job (*boasts, demanding, strong*) attracted women (the only group tested) less than an advertisement with “feminine” or neutral words (*polite, sensitive, capable*). The lower attraction was not because women did not think they could handle the job -- the language was off-putting.

Search actively and broadly. In 2006, the chemistry department at the University of Michigan [1] decided to experiment with an open search approach that it hoped could simultaneously better its standing in the field and attract a more diverse applicant pool. Between the academic years 2001 and 2004, the “before” period when the department used conventionally narrow advertisements for positions, women candidates submitted about 15 applications each year. Between 2006 and 2009, the “after” period when they adopted a policy of “open searching,” women submitted an average of 34 applications each year -- more than doubling their previous yield.

Not only did open searches increase the total applicant pool (as it would simply by broadening the areas of specialization), it also attracted a more diverse applicant pool.

Why? One main reason is that faculty members actively sought out diverse applicants at conferences and through colleagues they knew at institutions who had track records of mentoring students and postdocs from diverse backgrounds and who worked at institutions that had diverse student bodies.

Recognize the impact of expressed institutional values. Research has found that special hiring programs (including dual-career opportunities), family-friendly policies and job descriptions that mention institutional values that support diversity are more likely to yield diverse hires. Women and minorities are more likely than majority applicants to expect to be judged according to stereotypes, often leading them to assume that they may not fit or to anticipate discrimination absent such an explicit signal that the hiring institution will take their application seriously.

Effective Search Procedures and Practices

Once a job description exists, it is important to design search procedures and practices that will facilitate a more diverse pool of serious candidates than the current faculty displays. Search committees can adopt an explicit goal of identifying candidates who are *different* from existing faculty, and they can develop strategies for attracting those applicants.

In pursuing this goal, it is optimal to treat searching as an activity that is engaged in year-round by all faculty members. They can and should be continually on the lookout for rising young colleagues in the field, paying particular attention to those from underrepresented groups.

Faculty members may be tempted to rely on a narrow network of department members whom they know for recommendations of job candidates or the prestige of the institution where an applicant was trained. But the highest ranked departments are not necessarily graduating the largest numbers of female candidates and are unlikely to be producing the largest numbers of people of color. Therefore, depending on colleagues in those departments will not yield the most diverse pool of candidates.

A better strategy is to identify individuals who are mentoring women and minority doctoral students at other institutions and consider those faculty for senior positions at one's institution. Or, if one's own institution graduates significant numbers of well-trained women and minorities in fields where they are underrepresented, those graduates can become a good source of suggestions for other women and people of color as they move on to graduate, postdoctoral and faculty or research careers. It may make sense to recruit those graduates back on to the faculty in the future, in addition to relying on them as trusted references for women and minority applicants for faculty positions.

Each facet of the search process has implications for how candidates will be recruited and assessed. In requesting candidates' materials, committees can provide an open-ended opportunity for applicants to "make a case" for their fit and relevance to the position, so the committee can avoid having too little information to perceive an applicant's interesting qualifications. Increasingly, departments ask applicants to submit a statement about their past contributions to diversity and their anticipated contribution at the institution to which they are applying. The [Davis](#) ^[2] campus of the University of California has developed [guidelines](#) ^[3] for applicants in preparing such statements. These statements may help committees identify some faculty who have a track record of mentoring or contributing to institutional change that might matter to the department.

Other aspects of the search that should be considered include:

- The search committee composition. Be careful about choosing who will serve on the committee that screens full applications and makes recommendations for hiring decisions. If the job has been defined broadly, having broad expertise represented among the reviewers of applications is helpful.
- The competence of the committee. Those who serve on the review committee should be individuals who are knowledgeable about the possibility of implicit biases emerging. Knowledge does not ensure that the biases will not operate, but it does increase the likelihood of self-conscious efforts to use procedures that will minimize that possibility. Creating as diverse a committee as is feasible is crucial to the fairness of the decision-making process.
- The credibility of the committee. Don't assume that a committee with many women or minority group members will be a committee biased in favor of hiring women or minority group members, since evidence shows that women and minorities can hold implicit attitudes much like those of majority group members. But a diverse committee composition is likely to reassure both applicants and people in the institution that a range of perspectives has influenced decision making. That is, committee composition can operate as a cue that diversity is welcome.
- The training and education of the committee. Committee members should receive training and educational resources that increase their knowledge of the impact of evaluation biases and ways to overcome them. Workshops of this sort have been offered to search committee members at [Florida International University](#) ^[4];

Northeastern University [5]; the University of California, Davis; the University of Michigan and the University of Wisconsin [6], among others.

An alternative approach is to identify “equity advisers” who can serve on search committees in departments other than their own and provide input about appropriate procedures. This strategy has been successful at institutions like the University of California, Irvine [7], and Michigan State University [8]. If the equity advisers are well educated, have a high degree of credibility and are not felt merely to be “policing” the process, this model can be quite effective. In order to offer either kind of program, institutions must create a small group of senior faculty who will take on the task of studying the literature and presenting it to their colleagues or sitting in on search committees.

Colleges can also consider creating a standing search committee with a term of a few years, composed of individuals who have been educated in and are committed to the twin goals of excellence and diversity. In this way, the institution may benefit from a slower, more deliberative hiring process and a cadre of well-educated faculty charged with performing it.

As the search committee seeks to attract diverse faculty members, they need to consider how the institution and the department represent themselves on websites and in other descriptions and materials that job candidates might review. Does the department appear to be diverse in its current composition? Open to a range of perspectives? Eager to increase its breadth and inclusion of a range of interests and types of students and faculty? To have policies that support faculty members’ personal lives when there are increases in the complexity of responsibilities for family members requiring care?

If the department’s self-descriptions don’t provide enough good information about those issues, department leaders and search committee members might consider sending applicants packets of information that will improve their understanding of the institution’s commitments. Some institutions have identified women or underrepresented minority faculty who are willing to meet with job applicants outside the hiring department, so they can provide them with information about the institutional and community climate and culture for their group.

Collecting, maintaining and reviewing accurate data about the pool of candidates and applicants; those on the long, medium and short lists; and the outcomes (offers made, rejected and accepted) is vital. Collecting and -- especially -- reviewing data can itself affect both search processes and their success.

One practice that several schools and colleges at the University of Michigan have adopted is to provide every department with annual data about the rate of Ph.D. attainment by women and minorities in the relevant field five years earlier at Ph.D.-granting institutions, at institutions Michigan faculty consider peers and at Michigan itself. In addition, data are provided about the current population of faculty and doctoral students in that specific department. It’s also often gathered on the characteristics of the applicant pool, the interview list and the final short list of candidates.

Routine inspection of the figures provided at the outset of the search allows departments to examine and address when Ph.D. production at the institution in that field doesn’t measure up to peer or national Ph.D. production. In the course of the search, these data can be monitored, and deans or provosts can hold search committees accountable for at least attracting an applicant pool that reflects the diversity of the doctoral-degree pool. In addition,

mistaken assumptions about the potential availability of applicants can be corrected, and realistic aspirations can be developed.

When such data were first shared with departments at Michigan, many were surprised that they had graduated fewer women and minority Ph.D.s than they thought and that the pool of available applicants was larger than they had believed. Over time, at least some departments have used the data to challenge themselves to achieve the outstanding and diverse applicant pool they need if they are to hire the kind of faculty they want.

To sum up, we recommend that provosts, deans and department chairs:

- Encourage the adoption of open searches and remind faculty that they can be used to enhance both the diversity and the excellence of applicant pools and subsequent faculty hires.
- Publicly praise and consider rewarding departments or other units that succeed in increasing the diversity and excellence in their faculty. Describe the ways they accomplished this achievement to encourage others.
- Provide new resources for hiring that may be needed to increase diversity (more funding for travel for applicants or costs of providing educational resources to committees, for instance).
- Establish procedures that hold search committees and departments accountable for their procedures and their outcomes.
- Ensure that institutional policies that support faculty in various family situations are clear and accessible in institutional self-descriptions on paper and the web.
- Establish search committees that are diverse in terms of demographic characteristics and expertise but homogeneous in commitment to proactive, fair and equitable processes.
- Provide search committees and/or equity advisers with appropriate educational or training resources to perform their job competently. Consider appointing search committees over multiple years to maximize the development of expertise at searching.
- Ask search committees to document the procedures they use to maximize the diversity of the applicant pool, the fairness of their procedures, and their outcomes.
- Provide institutional data on Ph.D. pools and department-level outcomes that search committees and departments can use.

Section:

Diversity ^[9]

Author Bio:

Abigail J. Stewart is the Sandra Schwartz Tangri Distinguished University Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan. Virginia Valian is Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Linguistics and Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center. This essay is adapted from The Inclusive Academy: Achieving Diversity and Excellence, just published by The MIT Press.

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