

Best Practices for Search Committees

Pool Development

- Broad search definitions produce diverse applicant pools.¹ Language matters. The description should not just encourage women and minorities to apply. More assertive language could include, for example, “The search committee is especially interested in qualified candidates who can contribute, through their research, teaching, and / or service, to the diversity and excellence of the academic community.”²
- Expanded recruitment sources also produce diverse applicant pools. Active search committees will identify and contact graduate programs with high numbers of women and minority PhD candidates and utilize databases and fellowship directories that identify outstanding and diverse candidates.
- When asking colleagues at other schools about potential applicants, follow-up with a second question: “Do you know any good women or minorities?” This often introduces an entirely new set of qualified candidates.

Candidate Selection

- Make multiple lists with multiple criteria (Georgi, 2000).
- Use a candidate evaluation form. Discuss these forms in search committee meetings. Rater accountability has been shown to increase the accuracy and objectivity of ratings (Mero & Motowidlo, 1995).
- Encourage a discussion format that requires contributions from all members. Asking each member of the committee to comment on a candidate ensures that a vocal minority does not dominate the discussion. This format also provides an incentive for everyone to “do their homework.”
- Do not eliminate a name from the list for personal reasons (e.g., dual-career needs) until you have actively tried to recruit the candidate. Often, qualified potential candidates are struck from the list based on assumptions about their personal life.³

Identifying Unconscious Bias Both men *and* women hold unconscious biases. Research has shown that the brain employs these biases to make sense of complex situations. These biases disproportionately affect minorities, and can be found in:

- **Letters of Recommendation** A study of over 300 recommendation letters for successful medical faculty applicants found that letters for females were shorter, placed less emphasis on research, more emphasis on teaching, contained more “grindstone adjectives” such as “hardworking” and “diligent,” contained twice as many “doubt raisers,” and were less likely to include “stand-out” adjectives such as “brilliant” and “superb” (Trix & Psenka, 2003).
- **Performance Evaluation** Social psychology research has found that both men and women are more likely to hire a male applicant than a female applicant with an identical record (Steinpres et al., 1999). Deaux & Emswiller (1974) found that success is more frequently attributed to “skill” for males and “luck” for females, even when the evaluators are presented with evidence of equal success for both genders. Beginning in the 1970s symphony orchestras started requiring musicians to audition behind screens; since that time, the number of women hired has increased fivefold and the probability that a woman will advance from preliminary rounds has increased by 50% (Goldin and Rouse, 2000).
- **Publications** A study of postdoctoral fellowships awarded by the Medical Research Council in Sweden found that women candidates needed substantially more publications to achieve the same rating as men, unless they personally knew someone on the panel (Wenneras and Wold, 1997).
- **Small Numbers** Research has shown that women and minorities are judged more fairly when they are at least 30% of the applicant pool (Sackett et al., 1991; Heilman, 1980).

Search Committee Composition

A diverse search committee is often an important factor in identifying and attracting a wide range of talented candidates. Efforts should be made to include women and minorities on hiring committees, perhaps by utilizing faculty from adjoining departments.

¹ See, e.g., CU Presidential Advisory Committee on Diversity Initiatives Working Paper, 2005; Smith et al., 2004.

² Excerpt from the University of Michigan Faculty Handbook, 2004-2005

³ See, e.g., American Physical Society Best Practices for Recruiting Women

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