

Faculty Hiring: Best Practices for Search Committees

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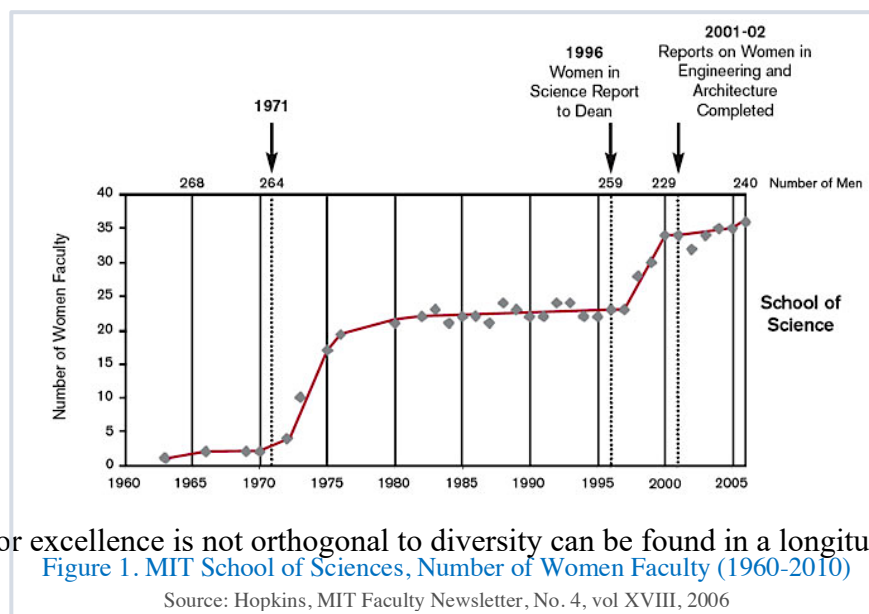
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1. Introduction

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.



Evidence

recruiting for excellence is not orthogonal to diversity can be found in a longitudinal case

Figure 1. MIT School of Sciences, Number of Women Faculty (1960-2010)

that

study on the representation of women STEM faculty at MIT. Figure 1 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. Below are some lessons learned from this study.

- *Leadership is critical.* When people want to make change occur, they can.
- *Efforts to diversify must be active and ongoing.* Intentional effort is required to avoid a loss of progress.
- *Excellence is not sacrifice for diversity.* A retrospective study showed that the women hired in the School of Sciences were at least as accomplished as their male colleagues.

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 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 begins, there are steps that a department can take to help support 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 request 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.
- Think of hiring as an opportunity to build the department in a desired direction. Avoid thinking in terms of replacing a specific departed faculty member.

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 talented scholars who are under-represented in the field.
- Invite potential candidates to give a talk in your department, even if they're not yet looking for jobs.

Attend a UD ADVANCE Faculty Recruitment Workshop

3. 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. For example,

- Is it to provide a ranked list of finalists for a departmental vote?
- Is it to identify which candidates to bring to campus?

Establish a broad timeline.

- Application deadline
- Deciding on the semi-finalist list
- Conducting virtual interviews
- Creating the finalist list
- Campus visits
- Department meeting. Selecting a finalist

Box 1. Search Committee Best Practices

- Ensure the committee represents a diversity of faculty (e.g., rank, race, gender, subfield).
- Plan meeting times so all members can attend.
- Create an agenda for each meeting.
- Take steps to ensure that everyone gets a say.
- If needed, have time limits for agenda items. But don't use time limits to quash important discussion.
- Record decisions in meeting minutes.

Discuss specific roles and duties played by individual committee members. For example,

- The role of the search committee chair
- The role(s) played by members acting as representatives of specific programs
- The role of any committee members from outside the department

Establish ground rules. For example,

- Will decisions be made by consensus or by majority vote?
- Will absentee voting 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 as part of the search process.*

- [See Appendix A: Active Recruitment of Faculty Candidates](#)

Create an **evaluation tool** based on agreed upon criteria for creating the semi-finalist list. You will need to submit information on this step before the finalist pool is approved.

- Search committees often start by writing and disseminating the job ad and only later discuss the criteria that will be used to evaluate the candidates. We suggest reversing the order: Ideally a committee should first develop one's criteria for a successful candidate so that these can be reflected in the ad.
- [See Appendix C: Tips for Creating Evaluation Tools for Faculty Searches](#)

4. Writing the Job Advertisement

The language of the job ad 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 and desired experience

- 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 and use this language when describing qualifications for the position.

Double check that the job ad reflects your evaluation criteria.

- For example, if contribution to a specific program (or to DEI) is important, include this in the ad.

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 applicants submit a diversity statement, specific diversity goals should be highlighted in the job ad.

[See Appendix B: The Use of Diversity Statements in Faculty Hiring.](#)

Consider mentioning UD's family-friendly policies. For example:

¹ Mohr, T. 2014. “Why Women Don't Apply for Jobs Unless They're 100% Qualified,” *Harvard Business Review*, August 25.

“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.

5. Fair Evaluation of Candidates

Cognitive shortcuts are mechanisms that our brains use to help people filter, sort, and analyze information. These mechanisms are useful for understanding and interpreting the world around us. However, cognitive shortcuts can sometimes cause us to make incorrect decisions and can lead to biased outcomes— as, for example, when they are based on stereotypes.

Bias in evaluation and selection processes is well documented in the literature. Below 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 material 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 hireable 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

² Wennerås, C., and A. Wold. 1997. “Nepotism and Sexism in Peer Review,” *Nature* 387: 341-43.

³ Moss-Racusin, C. 2012. “Science Faculty’s Subtle Gender Biases Favor Male Students,” *PNAS* 109 (41): 16474-16579.

⁴ Eaton, A.A., et al. 2019. “How Gender and Race Stereotypes Impact the Advancement of Scholars in STEM,” *Sex Roles*, published online June 03.

Box 2. Optimize Conditions for Evaluation

- *Minimize distractions such as exhaustion, hunger, and competing activities.*
Distractions increase the probability of evaluation error.
- *Mix up the order in which committee members review applications.*
For example, one committee member can evaluate applicants from A-Z while another does the reverse. This helps to offset evaluation shifts that come with time consuming evaluation of large numbers of candidates.
- *Take notes to help you stay focused and to use in group discussions of candidates.*

Members of search committees are tasked with processing a lot of information in a short amount of time. This is exactly the type of setting in which decision making can go awry. That said, there are steps that one can take to minimize the impact of cognitive shortcuts and the potential for bias in evaluation. After publication 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 progress towards gender parity in awarding fellowships.⁵

- Evaluate all applicants based upon the criteria reflected in your evaluation tool.
- 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 semi-finalist list.
- In some cases, committee chairs may request evaluation summaries on each candidate be submitted before the semi-finalist 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.

6. Creating a Semi-Finalist List & Virtual Interviews

Once each committee member has had time to review each candidate, the search committee will meet to create a semifinalist pool of candidates (~ 8-12). (Note: This pool must be approved as part of the search process.).

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

- Follow the “search committee general practices” listed in Box 1 (above).

⁵ Alqvhist, A., et al. 2015. “A Gender-Neutral Process?” *Report of the Swedish Research Council.*

- Start by discussing the clear-cut cases – e.g., the candidates that everyone agrees are excellent or unacceptable
- Keep or eliminate those candidates in which there is consensus. In absence of consensus, err on the side of keeping a candidate.
- Carefully discuss the remaining candidates with reference to the evaluation criteria reflected in your evaluation tool.
- Loop back to see if you missed anyone, especially if your semi-finalist list is not diverse.
- If the semi-finalist list is too long, carefully discuss which candidates should be kept and why. Again, keep the conversation focused on the committee’s agreed-upon criteria.

6,7,8,9

Box 3. Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Applicants

- *The pandemic has affected academic professional lives in different ways, depending on circumstance.* Research indicates that women and people of color have experienced larger professional setbacks than other groups, since the start of the pandemic.
- *We will soon see the effects of pandemic working conditions in applications for faculty positions.* Expect to see wide ranges in productivity (potentially higher highs and lower lows).
- Develop a plan for how to take pandemic considerations into account in your evaluation of candidates.

Virtual Interviews

Once the committee has settled on a semi-finalist list, committees often rely on virtual interviews 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

⁶ Bell M.L. & K.C. Fong. 2021. "Gender Differences in First and Corresponding Authorship in Public Health Research Submissions During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *Am J. Public Health* 111, 159-163.

⁷ Deryugina, et al. 2021. "COVID19 Disruptions Disproportionately Affect Female Academics." *NBER Working Paper* No. 28360.

⁸ Krukowski, R. A., et al. 2021. "Academic Productivity Differences by Gender and Child Age in STEMM Faculty During the COVID-19 Pandemic." *J. Women's Health* 30, 341–47.

⁹ Staniscuaski, F. et al. 2021. Race, and Parenthood Impact Academic Productivity During the COVID-19 Pandemic. From Survey to Action," *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, 1-14.

Box 4. Avoid the Slippery Slope

“The standard practice of open discussion gives too much weight to the opinions of those who speak early and assertively, causing others to line up behind them.”
 - Kahneman



- 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, refer to your criteria throughout the discussion of candidates.
- Share the committee’s criteria with those who will be involved in the final hiring decision.
- Sometimes discussion reveals a need to adjust evaluation criteria. This is fine, as long as the adjustments fit with agreed upon hiring priorities and are not an ad hoc means of accommodating a preferred candidate.

7. Creating a Finalist Pool & Campus Visits

The finalist pool is the set of candidates (typically 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. 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.*

- Find out if the candidate needs special accommodations.
- Ask whether the candidate would like to meet with people in other departments or programs.
- When creating the candidate’s 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 content in one's discussions with the candidate. And, in general, questions that touch upon age, race, ethnicity, national origin, disabilities, gender, religion, children, marital status or sexual orientation should be avoided.
- 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, 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 Box 4 above).

8. Closing the Deal & Beyond

The work of the search committee does not end when you turn over the department recommendation to the dean. Now that your department has selected their preferred candidate, take steps to make sure that they accept the offer. Keep updated on the progress of the offer. Is it moving along in a timely manner? Is the candidate receiving needed information for successful negotiation? 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!