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Searching for Faculty-The Mundane and the Controversy

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The search for an appropriate construction faculty member is a very challenging process. The process has changed over the years with technological advances that are utilized in disseminating the advertisement, as well as legal restraints that are imposed during the search. (broaden/restrict) There are controversial questions to be asked as well. Is it more important to have faculty that have been practitioners in the construction industry, or to have new Ph.D.'s with proven records of scholarly activity in construction? Are faculty from international backgrounds going to relate to the students and to the local construction organizations? Should construction faculty be diverse? Should construction faculty be politically correct? These questions should be addressed at the beginning of the search process.

Key Words: Assessment, Discrimination, Faculty Search

Introduction

Both the search methods and the composition of the construction faculty have changed over the years. In the early years of construction programs, a much more subjective search was made with few legal implications that were imposed. A department head might have examined applications from the mailbag, invited a candidate to campus, and soon after would offer a contract. Later years added legal checks and balances to the process to help avoid non-intentional discrimination. As the construction discipline has matured, faculty needs to be more than good teachers. Scholarly activity is a good indicator of the sophisticated needs in industry that have affected the expectations of new faculty. The changes in composition of faculty capabilities have affected other aspects of the search and the pool of those available. Increases in technology have now allowed the use of the Internet for the search process through e-mail and the World Wide Web. However, does this mean that the search process for faculty has arrived at an end result with no root problems that need to be addressed?

A detailed search procedure is advised, but careless and hurried steps at the beginning may still cause problems. There are not only legal problems that might occur, but also some moral issues that cause controversy behind closed doors. There are questions about what kind of faculty member is really needed.

Preliminary Considerations

The initial part of the search, before applications are received, has more impact on whether the search will go well than any other part of the process. It deserves a great deal of thought and examination, even though there is a great temptation to hurriedly get things moving quickly.

Committee Composition

The composition of the search committee should have a good mix of people, and obviously should consist of those who will take the task seriously since the task of recommending candidates is typically more time consuming than one would think. The number of committee members can vary--the author has served on such committees with as few as three and as many as eight members. However, personal experience has indicated that a committee of three allows too much weight given to an erratic evaluation by one of the committee members, whereas such variations average out with a larger number of members. However, the larger committee sizes may become unwieldy with difficulties in meeting times, needlessly long meetings to allow everyone to make verbal comments, or discouragement of expressing opinions in the interest of saving time.

The question of having a committee member from outside the program may depend on local dynamics. There are obvious advantages to doing so if the position requires much coordination with another program at the institution. In such cases, having a representative from the other affected program on the committee would be expected. A practitioner representative may be desirable if the position requires a lot of coordination with local industry. Examples of such situations could involve the hiring of a department chair/head, or a research position sponsored by industry. However, committee members who are not in the "chain of command" may not be able to continue the task with the same intensity that they started with once the time commitment increases and meetings need to be arranged during "crunch" time when short lead times are the norm.

The Announcement

A hurried preparation of the announcement could easily be regretted once screening of the responses begins. An overly restrictive requirement in the ad may rule out some perfectly adequate candidates that would be discouraged from applying, or require the committee to reject them as being non responsive. Educational background is the requirement that comes to the forefront--since construction is a newer academic discipline, degrees in architecture, business, engineering, industrial arts, etc. might be perfectly appropriate instead of restricting candidates to a degree in construction.

With this in mind, the announcement should distinguish between which qualifications are *required*, and which qualifications are *preferred*. Since the screening method should be tied to the description given, careful wording can help in narrowing the field to those that are truly qualified and assure that each standard is related to successful performance of the position. In addition to qualifications, the announcement should obviously include a brief statement describing the position, the contact person, and dates for when the position will be opened as well as the cut-off date.

Methods of advertising the position have changed in recent years. The increased use of the computer Internet has made information available in many new ways. The home page for the construction program is often used to provide information about faculty vacancies. The home page for associations like the Associated Schools of Construction (ASC) might include such announcements or links to them. There are also e-mail lists of people with common interests that would find vacancy announcements within the scope of their purpose. Again, the ASC maintains such a list where utilizing one e-mail address sends the message to all members on the e-mail system. Another example is the Co-operative Network for Building Research (CNBR) list maintained in Australia, but open to all subscribers around the world that have construction research interests, and provides an extensive international audience of over 500 faculty.

However, these have not replaced the old standby methods of sending hard copy vacancy announcements to other programs and organizations. Advertisements in magazines reach a large audience that may not be reached through any other method. While announcements sent to other schools are likely to promote applications from new Ph.D. graduates or an occasional current faculty member, magazine ads are more likely to be seen by those with more experience. Among the many examples of magazines, Civil Engineering is a good source for reaching ASCE members, and Engineering News Record reaches many practitioners. Ads in these particular magazines are fairly expensive, and one should also be prepared for many applications that are "blanket responses" from people that respond to all ads regardless of whether they are remotely qualified or not.

It is likely that the university office of equal employment and affirmative action has some guidelines for wording of the announcement, lists of organizations to send the announcement to, and some oversight of the search process. This office should not be thought of as just another set of guidelines to meet, but rather a valuable resource. Since that office deals with searches from all kinds of departments, they have probably seen most types of situations that might arise. For example, it is possible that the search could result in a legal challenge from an unsuccessful applicant. Even if it seems inconceivable that it would happen in your search, the university has probably already dealt with such an incident. Their experiences can help prevent future difficulties that your search would never have thought of.

Operating Procedure During the Search

Once the preliminary steps have been completed, the faculty search process needs to be well organized.

Screening Applications

An orderly method of handling applications needs to be developed. Logging them in, numbering, and sending an acknowledgment should be routine. This is also a good time to note and request any incomplete information from the applicant. Mailing any EEO/AA forms that may be required for anonymous tracking of the applicant pool is easiest to include in the same mailing.

After reading a number of applications, they all begin to look alike. Rather than a subjective reading of the applications by the committee, a screening method that allows for rejection of those that do not meet the advertised requirements and permits a ranking of those that remain should be utilized. It should be recognized that consistency in the evaluation is absolutely necessary as it is typical that the applicants will not all be evaluated at one sitting. One method that has proven successful (Al-Khafaji, 1996) is to utilize a form that starts with the requirements stated in the ad (such as required degrees, experience, etc.) and space for the committee members to indicate whether the candidate meets those requirements or not, and then if they should be considered further. In addition to just "yes" or 11no", one option might be a "hold" category for unusual circumstances such as an incomplete application.

To provide a quantitative method to preliminarily rank applicants, a spreadsheet can easily be developed that allows rating the applicant (e.g. from 1 to 5) in several different categories. The committee weights each category according to the desired balance before evaluations begin. Categories might include teaching background, industry experience, academic course background, research and publications, and quality of institution as examples of things that might be considered. If teaching background were considered more desirable than industry experience, that category might be weighted by a factor of 3 instead of the 2 for industry experience, as the committee desires. A total score is computed by summing the products of the rating by the committee member of the applicant for each category times the weight of that category. Although it may be considered somewhat dehumanizing to assign numbers to people, this does permit a preliminary method of sorting through a possibly large number of applicants in an objective manner. As long as committee members are consistent in their rating values, it also provides a method that is valid over long time periods when later applications are received and must be evaluated.

One area of caution should be emphasized. It is most important to avoid any illegal discrimination in the process. Such discrimination is not necessarily intentional. Any method that results in screening out members of a protected group at a higher rate than other groups is suspect (Bradley University, 1986). For example, the category on the screening form mentioned above: "quality of institution" could be used in an ulterior manner to discriminate against candidates that attended an institution typically identified with one group of people. An outside list of "quality institutions" should be utilized instead.

Other unexpected results can happen with the use of the screening form if care is not taken in its preparation and implementation. Such an example is the category "research and publications". Merely counting publications could eliminate new Ph.D.'s that are just beginning the process of submitting articles for publication.

References

References are utilized to provide independent information about the candidate. Phone conversations with the reference provide the most information, but require more time to arrange.

If phone references are used, a standard list of questions is advisable for consistency. Such questions are likely to include "How well do you know the applicant?", "Why are they leaving their current position?", "What is your evaluation of their scholarship/personality/teaching ... ?", etc. Written reference letters are less likely to include any information on limitations of the applicant, whereas phone conversations may allow the opportunity to ask probing follow-up questions. If written reference letters are utilized, originals should obviously be sent directly from the reference rather than copies provided by the applicant. References are less likely to be honest and complete in nature when the letter is given to the applicant and allowed to be read by them. Glowing reference letters addressed "To Whom It May Concern" fit in this category. Reasons for such a situation may range all the way from the letter being supplied as a gesture when fired from a previous position, to the situation where the person giving the reference will no longer be available. Fax machines and e-mail though, have made it easier to get written letters of recommendation directly.

Transcripts

If original reference letters are desirable, it is even more desirable for transcripts or degree verifications to be originals. Past history shows that there is exaggeration, misrepresentation, and down right fraud in some elements of our society and this has been shown to be true with statements about college degrees as well.

Phone Interviews

A phone interview with the highest rated candidates helps to narrow the field further. As is the case with phone references, a standard list of questions helps to keep the evaluations consistent. Such questions might include "Do you consider yourself to be a researcher or a teacher?", "What are your strengths/weaknesses?", etc. By using this method, an assessment can also be made of the applicant's accuracy of information previously furnished, communication ability, and personality. Salary expectations could also be addressed to see if this might be a stumbling block.

Campus Visit

Once these steps have been completed, selections of candidates for a campus visit can be arranged. More than one candidate should be interviewed on campus to allow for more complete comparisons. Bringing the candidate to your campus allows both the candidate and the people in your program to gain much more familiarity with each other than can ever be possible otherwise. Tours of the facilities should be arranged, and individual meetings with the search committee and administrators are necessary to get questions answered. A classroom presentation by the candidate to faculty and students is desirable so that a feel for teaching ability and communication openness can be developed. In addition to having students at the presentation, it is good to have a time for the candidate to talk with students alone. This not only allows the candidate to get familiar with what he is getting into, but student input is valuable in completing the evaluation form for recommending appointment.

Clarifications/Expectations

The campus visit allows for clarification of any expectations. Questions from the candidates are commonly expressed about what the course teaching load is, what kind and how much scholarly activity is expected, and what the tenure process involves. Making sure that these are answered clearly avoids long-term problems that might arise from false expectations. Having the candidate indicate which courses listed in the catalog they would be most comfortable in teaching, helps to identify capabilities as well.

Legal Considerations

In any phone conversations and during the campus interview, care must be taken in the types of questions asked the candidate (Bradley University, 1985). One should be familiar with how to handle these procedures with information from the EEO/AA office. For example, questions that divulge marital status should not be asked. For access purposes only, the candidate could be asked for their current legal name and if any records needed are under a different name. Candidates should not be told that any particular religious groups are required to work on their religious holidays, but should be advised of the normal hours and days of work required instead. Likewise, questions that bring out information on handicaps that are not job related should be avoided. Instead ask if they are able to carry out particular job assignments and perform them in a safe manner. The goal should be to ask questions that help assess the critical areas of job performance.

Rejections

Applicants will often be anxious to know the status of the search, and if they are still in the running for the vacant position. In answering phone calls, perhaps the best approach is to be honest about where the search is (whether the search is still in the preliminary screening mode, phone interviews with the top candidates, or waiting to see if an offer made will be accepted), but also to indicate that it is not yet closed and the applications are still active and under consideration. However, once the position has been filled, letters should be sent advising applicants of that fact. In the relief of finally filling the position, one may feel that the job is done and might be reluctant to even touch the files again. Even though rejection letters are not pleasant to handle, it is the polite thing to do and they should be neither brutal nor condescending in manner.

Controversial Area

Even though the search would seem to be straightforward and logical, areas of controversy can rise from biases deep within. An email announcement (Timothy O'Leary, personal communication, December 13, 1995) that advertised a position for women only caused emotions to run high with "flaming" responses from the recipients. Such gender specific advertisements would not be used in the US, but were appropriate in the sender's country. It is hoped that illogical biases are scarce in this day and age, but some questions should be addressed.

Practitioner vs. New Ph.D.

One area that needs to be addressed very early in the search process is settling the controversy over whether the new faculty member should be a new Ph.D. or a practitioner from industry. The local situation could dictate that it is purely one or the other--perhaps a new research program is being developed or a relation with industry extension service is needed, but this is seldom the case. Ideally, one would like to have everything in one person. The author has found that stereotypes commonly held are not necessarily valid. Should one think of a practitioner as one who can ramble in front of the class while guzzling a can of beer, cuss and swear a blue streak, and share "war stories" from his experience that the students will eat up--that they will be imparting the knowledge needed in a particular course? Should one think of a new Ph.D. as one who is thrilled with his theoretical thesis and applies partial derivatives to all examples, imports them to PowerPoint for his classroom lecture, and is really only interested in research--that they will be able to keep students interested in a lower level course? These notions are silly! At least the author has never met anyone who exactly matched either of these stereotypes. A good fit for the program is necessary and that is why the search criteria need to be thought out well in advance about the qualifications necessary. If a person is interested in teaching construction to college students, they are very likely to have a mixture of both theory and practices. A new Ph.D. might be very up to date on the slang and jargon used in construction that was acquired through his research. A practitioner might be well read and versed in new areas that have had to be dealt with in practice.

International/Minority Faculty

Another controversial question that might be heard is "Why are there so many faculty with international backgrounds?", the implication being that this is bad. While this question is seldom heard from colleagues, it has been heard from prospective students and from practitioners on occasion.

The concern from prospective students is perhaps better expressed as "Will this faculty member be able to be understood in class?" If this is truly the concern, then it is obviously one of the categories to be used in evaluating faculty candidates. The communication ability of faculty members can then be addressed in answer to an improperly phrased question from a prospective student.

Such a question about international faculty or other ethnic, racial, or religious groups might arise from a limited segregated exposure to such groups. The earlier comments about stereotypes apply again. The author would argue that exposure to groups outside ones experience is part of the education process that universities espouse. This can even be illustrated within construction practices. The author has encountered students who felt from their construction experience that one type of construction method must be a universal practice (the "we've always done it this way" attitude). They were amazed to find that geographic conditions, even within the 48 contiguous states, might dictate that their construction method could be less desirable or even totally impractical in other areas of the country! This little incident could be multiplied many times if one were to consider construction in the international arena. Since our society is becoming more global in nature, the views that international faculty expose construction students to, provide an advantage in the students education that may allow them to be more competitive globally.

If the asking of such a question implies an initial bias toward ones own group, it should be recognized as probably being true. If the population in general is initially attracted to their own groups, it is as true for students and practitioners as it is for anyone else. It is noted that African American students desire African American professors as role models and as someone that they can relate to. The same is said for female students. Thus when minority or other group enrollments in construction programs are desired, a faculty member on staff from that group is recognized as being very advantageous. The point is that a broadly based and balanced faculty can be a wonderful combination. Although awareness of different groups is part of human behavior, attitudes of group superiority are not to be part of it.

Conclusion

Faculty searches have become more sophisticated and technologically advanced. However, a detailed examination needs to be made at the beginning of the process to not only avoid potential problems, but to get a picture of the faculty member that is really needed for the program. A vision for the future, needs to be developed and considered. If construction is becoming more global in nature, more globally oriented faculty are needed in the program. Exclusion of certain faculty groups does not become an issue if the real goals of the program and the requirements of the faculty member are examined in detail. One important aspect of outcome assessment has been the establishment of goals and objectives of construction programs. The same principles should be used in the faculty search. Hiring the right faculty member becomes more than getting a good match for the short term, but also requires matching long term goals that are not just individual but broad in nature for the future of the program. All the seemingly mundane work involved in the search process then becomes worthwhile.

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