

# How to Keep Faculty Searches on Track

By Alina Tugend JANUARY 06, 2019 PREMIUM



Reed College  
A tenure-track search "is a 30-year investment on the part of the institution," says Mary B. James, dean of institutional diversity at Reed College. "We're literally hiring the midcentury faculty right now." That's why searches "are the most urgent projects faculty and universities face."

**F**aculty searches can go wrong in many ways. A senior professor can dominate.

Internal candidates can be given preferential treatment. And other biases too, implicit and explicit, can rear their ugly heads.

But in job interviews, as in dating, it is often the little things that become sticking points.

Jerlando F.L. Jackson, a professor of higher education at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, remembers when he was a candidate. "I was choosing between here and another place in a very large city," he said. "I was put in a hotel that had no elevator. Here I am lugging all my luggage up three flights. And it was a very small room."

"I'm thinking, 'Is this what they think of me? Am I last on the list? And if I have to stay here when I'm being recruited, will I have to stay at a Motel 6 when I travel for work?'" said Jackson, who is also director and chief research scientist of Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory.

When you're looking to hire a faculty member who will stick around for a few years, said Mary B. James, dean of institutional diversity at Reed College, "the worst practices are laissez-faire" searches.

The best ones, said Allison Vaillancourt, vice president for business affairs and human resources at the University of Arizona, "are very well organized. They create a timeline and schedule all the meetings in advance with milestones and targets they are trying to hit."

**“Even if you brought in tons of funding and are a great researcher, you won't be a good chair if you can't nurture a faculty.”**

Too often, though, the laissez-faire wins out over the well-organized. "Think of the other things that schools invest in that have a long timeline — buildings or programs or departments," said Reed's James, who is also a professor of physics. "No one does that without a ton of advance planning. I do not think faculty searches, in general, are done that way. The faculty often replaces Bob 1 with Bob 2. What they should be saying is, 'What are the goals for our department or program in 2040?'"

A tenure-track search "is a 30-year investment on the part of the institution," she said. "We're literally hiring the midcentury faculty right now. That's why they are the most urgent projects faculty and universities face, but they don't think of it that way."

Reed has revamped its process over the past several years and now starts planning one year before the search begins because, as James said, it's rarely a surprise when tenured professors retire or leave.

The idea, she said, is to hammer out the criteria the department needs, including curricular diversity (teaching new and emerging disciplines); pedagogical diversity; people who have lived experiences, for example, of being a person of color, religious minority, or LGBTQ; cultural competence; and scholarly expertise.

And that has to happen, she said, "before anyone opens a file and there's an actual real person." Because once that happens, "all implicit biases kick in and everyone's falling in love with candidates. We make up criteria to fit the people we like in those files."

## Battling Bias

Vassar College also re-examined and changed its search process several years ago, said Jonathan Chenette, dean of the faculty, and is now in the second year of a pilot program that requires, among other things, that an equity adviser be part of every tenure line or multiyear faculty search. The adviser, Chenette said, is a volunteer faculty member who is paid a stipend and trained to make sure that "every candidate is treated fairly and equitably and promoting decision-making based on evidence."

That can include establishing beforehand how to treat internal and external candidates equitably, or guidelines for considering spousal candidates. For example, if external candidates are being video-interviewed at the shortlist stage, the internal candidates should also be interviewed by video, rather than face-to-face, to avoid giving an advantage.

In searches, the issue of bias needs to be laid on the table from the beginning.

"It's not a blame/shame thing," James said. "Everyone has implicit biases — we want a structure around what we're doing to mitigate the effect." That needs to happen before any candidates are considered.

The word "fit," as in looking for someone to fit into the department's culture, she said, is a perfect example.

"If we're thinking or saying out loud the word 'fit,' what do we really mean? Do we mean we don't want to take the time to mentor that person? Well, let's hammer that out now. So, the year before, we talk about mentoring, and we even assign the mentor."

Therefore, if someone is coming to Reed from a very different institution, the fact he or she may need some help adjusting won't be seen as a negative, said James, because it has already been planned for.

Individual committee members need to be very aware of their own prejudices — and not just the obvious ones of race, ethnicity, or gender.

Vaillancourt, of the University of Arizona, said, "I have a bias for people who are very charismatic, and I have to watch myself. Others have a bias for people from East Coast schools. If you create some trust in the committees, people will obviously be more willing to reveal their biases."

The role of an equity adviser, Chenette said, is to help bring these kinds of prejudices to light. For example, if a department consistently rejects candidates who did not attend a top-20 institution, that needs to be examined. "You need to say why you reject candidates as well as why you advance them," he said.

## How to Handle Inside Scoops

An issue that almost always arises and that should be discussed before the search begins is how to handle personal knowledge of the candidate that committee members have or seek out during the process.

Margaret Fong Bloom, a professor emerita of counselor education and counseling psychology at Marquette University, said there are always those on search committees who "think of it as their job to check out everything about this person using their unofficial networks to do that."

The problem, she said, is that candidates who may have been changemakers or bosses at their previous institution are bound to have left behind a few disgruntled colleagues or subordinates.

Bloom has been involved in hiring faculty for years, at several institutions — as a department chair, vice provost, and dean of education. When she was a department chair, she had to deal with a tenured faculty member twice accused of sexual harassment. When Bloom applied for a dean's position at another institution, one of the members of the search committee knew the accused professor and asked for his opinion of Bloom.

"I was sitting there with the search committee at the end of two days and then the person brought it up — ‘Well, we talked to Dr. So-and-So and here’s what he said,’” Bloom recalled. "I just about fell off my seat." But, she said, at least she was told what was said about her and given the chance to respond.

To avoid surprises like that, Bloom said, she believes that candidates should be asked — once the committee is seriously considering them — for permission to speak to people outside of their reference list about their work.

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It can be difficult for candidates to refuse without appearing as if they have something to hide, but "there is a way to say no," Bloom said, such as "I would prefer you didn’t contact individuals, and let me explain why." If nothing else, the candidate is given a heads-up that such conversations are going on.

Another painful lesson: Don’t bring a candidate to campus and, especially, don’t plan a daylong show-and-tell unless you’re very certain the candidate is a good prospect. Vaillancourt said that once, after a one-hour phone interview with a candidate, a search committee she served on scheduled a daylong visit capped off by a group dinner. But within the first hour of the face-to-face interview, it became clear "we had made a terrible mistake," she said. "His vision and ours" were very different, and there was no chemistry between the candidate and the search committee.

"What I learned from that process is that an hour interview is not enough to merit bringing someone to campus," she said. "Or if you are going to bring them to campus, don’t do the whole dog-and-pony show."

Now most interviews are done by video conferencing before there is talk of a personal visit, yet even those interviews should be carefully thought out, said Catherine Gunther Kodat, provost and dean of the faculty at Lawrence University, in Wisconsin.

"We’re now vetting semifinalists through Skype," she said.

It’s important to decide how everyone on the committee is going to sit before getting on the call. You want to make sure everyone fits into the frame of the video lens, said Kodat, and "it’s also good for search committees to be aware of unintended messages that could be sent by the seating arrangement, in terms of who’s sitting at the center of the frame versus who’s seated at the margins."

In addition, ask people the same questions in the same order. "If you ask people questions in a different order, people can feel there’s a different sort of emphasis —

you run into the risk of bias if you're not asking the same question of every candidate," she added.



Jeff Miller, U. of Wisconsin-Madison

Hiring, says Jerlando F.L. Jackson, a professor of higher education at the U. of Wisconsin at Madison, "is one of the most important things we do as an institution and take the least amount of time ensuring it's done well."

Also, decide what happens when internal candidates don't make it through to the final round, said Wisconsin's Jackson. There should be guidelines on whether they attend the talks other candidates give and, if so, if it is acceptable for them to ask questions.

"I've seen an unsuccessful internal candidate who did not make it to the interview stage go to a talk of another candidate and ask what could be viewed as an inappropriate line of questioning," he said.

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Barring internal candidates from talks or requesting they don't ask questions "may not be enforceable, but I do think that institutions should put some thought into at least sharing what they believe to be appropriate behavior," Jackson said.

Thinking on Their Feet

An interview is not just a time to ask questions but to see how well applicants think on their feet and handle real-world problems, said Dan Shapiro, vice dean of faculty and administrative affairs and a professor of humanities in medicine at Pennsylvania State University's College of Medicine.

Shapiro, who recruits department chairs, said search committees focus too often on people with grand strategic visions rather than looking at how they can handle the day-to-day grind.

While big ideas are important, "it's harder to sit next to someone and say, 'I'm sorry your grant didn't get funded, and we need you to teach this course,'" Shapiro said. "You need to have the emotional intelligence to manage the bread and butter of the job, or you're not going to have a lot of success. Even if you brought in tons of funding and are a great researcher, you won't be a good chair if you can't nurture a faculty, hold them accountable, and have a calibrated response to misbehavior."

To that end, about four years ago Shapiro persuaded the search firms he works with to include simulated employee encounters. The idea isn't to present a dramatic dilemma, but a situation where a chair "is dealing with a mildly disgruntled faculty member" who also has a small accountability problem.

In a [paper](#) Shapiro co-wrote, "Using a Simulation of a Frustrated Faculty Member During Department Chair Searches: A Proof of Concept Project," the problem was laid out like this: A faculty member who has worked at the institution for 18 months in outpatient settings is frustrated with how little time is available for academic pursuits. The person is a skilled teacher with highly satisfied patients but is less clinically productive than other colleagues.

The candidates are given the scenario in advance.

About one-third of the candidates who were interviewed in four department-chair searches between May 2015 and November 2016 — and who otherwise looked good — [didn't perform well](#) during the simulations.

"Sometimes they didn't listen, didn't ask questions, or tried to solve all the problems at once," Shapiro said. Some responded with too much aggression or a lack of empathy.

"One asked, 'How's your marriage?' which is totally inappropriate," Shapiro said. He was surprised at the number of candidates who already had leadership positions, such as running a lab, who nonetheless did poorly.

A sophisticated response would be, "I'm glad you came to see me — let's do some homework and try to figure this out," he said. "And in fairness, the ones who did do well really shined. They loved it."

As part of the exercise, candidates were asked to talk about how they thought they had done in the simulation, and "some were really reflective," Shapiro said. "One said, 'I made a joke and he didn't respond, and, in retrospect, it was too early to do that.'"

Don't gloss over emotional warning signs, "such as fragility, entitlement, or treating staff or admins badly," he said. For example, some people seem unable to deal if it's too hot in a room or the car arrives a little late. "It's life's normal insults and they can barely function all of a sudden."

### **Idea Lab: Faculty Recruitment**

On the other hand, notice when someone seems able to handle unpredictability with ease. Shapiro recalled when a fire alarm went off during one interview. Everyone filed out, and upon returning, the interviewee picked up "like nothing happened. He didn't freak out, he didn't bat an eye. I was so impressed with that calmness and steadiness."

And make sure, said Bloom, that the questions you do ask count. Not "'Are you an advocate for social justice?' but 'Can you give me an example of how you include social justice in a course?'"

Vaillancourt said, "One of my favorite questions is, 'What makes you really angry?'" For her, a good answer might be, "I get angry at people who treat other people badly." A bad answer can be a red flag, like this one that she actually received: "People who don't give me the respect I deserve."

Like any match, nobody will be ideal, and too many search committees fall into the trap of waiting for Dr. Perfect. And unlike in a romance, multiple people have to agree.

"You have to go into this process with the idea that we've got five or six things we want, and if we get three or four of them, that's totally awesome," Kodat said.

Remember too that wooing goes both ways. A candidate that impresses your search committee might have multiple offers in the wings. Too often, Bloom said, institutions think it's self-evident that they are one of the best.

Finally, Jackson said, offer "concierge-level service." Visit the actual hotel rooms candidates will stay in, not just the lobby. Make sure all members of the search



committee know meal-reimbursement policies and who will pay for what to avoid having interviewers squabble in front of the candidate when the bill is presented.

Minimize the candidate's out-of-pocket expenses by prepaying for travel. Give regular updates on the process.

Hiring, said Jackson, "is one of the most important things we do as an institution and take the least amount of time ensuring it's done well. We call it search and screen, but it's also recruiting. You may not select every person, but you want to be in a position to do so."