

STRIDE
BREAKOUT SCENARIO DISCUSSIONS
MAY 2007

At the May 2007 Faculty Recruitment Workshops, four scenarios were discussed during scheduled breakout sessions. The purpose of these scenarios was to generate discussion and suggestions about potential recruitment challenges. The following document has been developed to share the helpful suggestions from these sessions.

Scenario 1. After reviewing 136 applications for your department's one open position, your committee now has a short list. There are no female or minority candidates in the short list. You were planning to revisit the applications, but an influential senior faculty member on the committee feels very strongly about one of the candidates on the short list. This candidate, who is male, fits a narrow niche about which the senior faculty member feels very strongly. What can you do?

Strategy:

- There are two issues. One is that there are no minority candidates. The second is that a senior faculty member has preference for one of the existing candidates. Might there be a way to get support to hire more than one faculty member?
- One could work with the chair.
 - Discuss the various ways the committee might review the pool.
 - Perhaps slow down the process. Everyone on the committee might be asked to go back to the pool and bring back candidates who are women or minority.
- One problem is that people bring up candidates--then shoot them down. There is a need for someone on the committee who is really invested in this.
- One could try to get the committee to talk about the explicit criteria used.
- The Chair has responsibility for developing a process that will generate minority candidates.
- One thing that a department can do is to not have individual search committees for individual positions. There can be non-experts in the specific field under consideration as well as experts.
- Structure the process to mediate the power of any one individual who assumes she or he has more influence on the process.
- Establish a different kind of search committee.
- Insist that a valid search be conducted. Do not allow a situation in which the attitude that "We know he'll come out on top anyway" shuttles a promising scholar to the top of the list.
- Pay attention to departmental needs in searching. Even stellar researchers have to come in as Associate Professors without tenure until they establish they can work with students, etc.
- There may be some difference in fields. More and more, some departments are looking for someone who can strengthen the Department in several areas. This kind of value mediates the view of searching that is discussed in the scenario.

Scenario 2. One of the very strong candidates on your short list mentioned in the cover letter that locating employment for a partner is important. Someone on the search committee mentioned that this candidate's partner is in the same field, but you only have one open position. What can you do?

Strategies:

- Call the dean's office and get the dean to work with the Provost to find the partner a position.
- Take advantage of interdisciplinary split appointments, especially for a senior partner.
- In one case, the senior (male) partner of a junior (female) recruit accepted a partial appointment (3/4), that was later be converted into full time.
- Could we have a link on the dual career website to interdisciplinary opportunities at UM?
- Pursue position-splitting for the two people.
- Pursue getting a second position.
- Have an open discussion with the candidate, so you get clear about both what is needed, and what the real constraints are.
- Network with local academic institutions about possible positions; network with local non-academic work settings for non-academic positions.
- Consider a visiting one-year position that would buy time to work out something better longer term.
- One thing NOT to do is to let this affect the person's candidacy. This would be both illegal and unfair; the partner situation cannot/should not weigh in the decision about who to make an offer to.

Issues:

- Sometimes dual career solutions trade one problem for another -- eg. upsets balance of areas in a department if both partners are in the same subarea.

Scenario 3. You notice that one of the candidates in the applicant pool whose work you think is promising has several strong letters in addition to a couple of pretty unconvincing letters in her file. Based on your knowledge of her subfield and her own file, you really think she is a candidate worth considering. What can you do?

Strategies:

- Point out to the search committee that faculty give too much weight to negative or neutral letters, because people assume letters will be positive, and a negative comment “must be true.” This is especially true in the USA. In contrast, in England letters are more direct and honest, so negative letters aren’t so detrimental for a candidate.
- Point out to the search committee that negative letters seem to come up most for candidates in interdisciplinary fields, where the evaluator may be less able to judge.
- Call the person who wrote the lukewarm letter, to find if they will say things “off-the-record.” This may raise more problems, though, and so might not be the best way to be an advocate for the candidate.
- Ask the committee to look at the letter carefully—are there ‘doubt raisers’? Cite the Trix and Psenka study “The color of Glass: Letters of Recommendation for Female and Male Medical Faculty.”
- Talk about the letter writers.
- Do you discount some letter writers?
 - For example, MD’s write over-the-top letters.
 - Letters of minimal assurance—call for more information on these.

Scenario 4. You're hiring in a particular subfield of your discipline for which you currently only have one faculty member. He's a very senior researcher, and he's also known to be quite antagonistic to affirmative action efforts; moreover, he's been known to make somewhat inappropriate comments to female researchers visiting your department. You're thus not only concerned about how he will behave during discussions of candidates in the department meetings, at the interview, but also with the way he will treat a female faculty member should you hire one. What can you do?

Strategies:

- Tell the senior faculty member in advance that it is inappropriate to behave in certain ways and that he will be held responsible for making inappropriate suggestions.
- Talk with the faculty candidate to let her know what the issues are, and to reassure her that she will have the backing of other people in the department and won't have to rely on the senior faculty member.
- Orchestrate the visit so that the faculty candidate doesn't meet alone with the senior faculty member, e.g., have them meet at a lunch.
- Ensure that there are other support mechanisms for the faculty candidate should she join the department. For example, early on cultivate people in her area of expertise from other schools so that there are people other than the senior faculty member who can assess her work at promotion time.
- If she's really good, be prepared to make strong arguments in her favor at the hiring committee meetings, to counter negative things that the senior faculty member might say.
- Don't get into this situation in the first place. Faculty always want to hire in their own areas. If this senior faculty member is so disruptive, don't give him the "reward" of a slot in his area; instead allocate them to areas in which faculty are more cooperative.