

Tips and guidelines for Search Committee chairs: Running an effective and efficient search committee

An organized, effective search committee is a key factor in the successful recruitment of faculty and senior leadership. The ideal search chair will be a strong leader, a consensus builder, an effective communicator, and a person who has the time and dedication to see the search through to completion. Leadership skills are crucial. The search chair will need to keep the committee focused throughout the search process, and to build consensus among committee members. It is also important for the search chair to lead the group to make decisions in situations when full consensus isn't possible. The search chair must stay in close communication with the Division Director or the Department Chair throughout the process and provide consistent updates about the search process.

Building rapport among committee members

1. Gain the support of committee members

In productive search committees, the committee members feel that their work is important, that each of them has an essential role in the process, and that their involvement in the search process will make a difference. To generate such perspectives, the chair and each committee member can set the tone in the first meeting and can try to make sure that every member of the committee feels involved, valued, and motivated to play a significant role in the search. Some tips include:

- Begin with brief introductions to get committee members talking and comfortable with each other. Do not assume that members already know one another – this assumption may not be correct, particularly if the search committee includes members from outside the department.
- Be enthusiastic about the position, potential applicant pool, and composition of the search committee.
- Remember that this age of tight budgets each position is precious and that it's up to the committee to ensure that the best candidate is in the pool.
- Understand that the search process is far more idiosyncratic and creative than the screening process and that each committee member can put his or her individual stamp on the process by shaping the pool.
- Appreciate each committee member for the critical role he or she is playing by helping to select future faculty who will represent the department of the university for years to come.

2. Actively involve all committee members in discussions and search procedures

Active involvement of every member of the committee will contribute to a more effective search. Such involvement will help the committee reach a broader base of applicants and conduct more thorough evaluations. To generate active participation, the chair can implement the following suggestions:

- In the first committee meeting, engage in at least one exercise in which every committee member participates – such as a discussion of the essential characteristics of a successful candidate or a brainstorming session about people to contact to help identify candidates.

- Be especially sensitive to interpersonal dynamics that prevent members from being full participants in the process. Many of us may assume, for example, that senior faculty are more likely than junior faculty to have connections or ideas about people to contact for nominations or that staff members will be less critical in their evaluations.

3. Make meetings productive

Committee members need to feel that the search is well-conceived, well-run, and that the committee meetings are essential. The first meeting shapes committee members' attitudes about the process and their role in it. Strive to help committee members recognize that what they are doing is important, that their attendance of committee meetings and the work they do outside the meetings is a good use of their time, and that their participation will make a difference. Some tips to achieve this include:

- (a) Rely on an agenda with time allotted to each topic and generally try to adhere to the plan.
- (b) Begin meetings by reviewing the agenda and obtain agreement on agenda items. If one committee member is digressing or dominating a discussion, gently and politely try to redirect the discussion by referring back to the agenda.
- (c) If you deviate from the agenda or run over time, acknowledge this and provide a reason. Doing so will help committee members feel their time as well spent, that the meeting was not a random process, and that they can anticipate useful and well-run meetings in the future.
- (d) Try to end meetings on time so that all committee members are present for the entire discussion

Tasks to accomplish in initial meeting

To avoid time pressure from the very beginning, and to give the committee members a chance to discuss the issues in the search, their responsibilities, and the ground rules, hold the first meeting at least a month or 6 weeks before the application deadline.

1. Discuss and develop goals for the search

Engage in a discussion of goals for the search and use the agreed upon goals to develop recruitment strategies and criteria for evaluation of candidates as well as advertising goals. The developing of a time line will be essential.

2. Discuss and develop the position description and job competencies (the formal charge)

In order to do this effectively, each committee member must have an in-dept understanding of the position that must be filled, as well as the set of timelines and best practices to work from. This should happen in coordination with the Division Director or the Chair of the Department. Discussion about responsibilities and expectations of the position and how they fit into the larger needs of the institution as well as the characteristics, experiences, and skills that will make a person successful in the position.

3. Discuss and establish ground rules for the committee

Establish ground rules for the committee at the outset can set expectations, maximize efficiency, and prevent conflicts from arising later. Ground rules should cover such items as:

(a) Attendance

The work of a search committee is cumulative and it can be very frustrating when a member who has missed one or more meetings raises issues and/or questions already discussed at previous meetings. More importantly, evaluation of applicants can be compromised if one or more committee members are not present for the discussion of all applicants' qualifications. Establishing policies regarding attendance and participation of search committee members can help avoid these complications. Some committees require all search members to attend all search committee meetings and activities and stipulate that members who do not attend must accept decisions made while they were absent. Committee chairs can also help prevent absences by scheduling meetings well in advance. If possible, establish a schedule of meetings at the outset.

(b) Decision making

How will the committee make decisions? By consensus? By voting? It is important to determine this at the outset. Each method has its strengths and limitations. Voting is quickest, but a simple majority does not always lead to effective implementation of or satisfaction with decisions.

(c) Confidentiality and disclosure

Members of the search committee must be absolutely committed to protecting candidate confidentiality. A best practice is to let each committee member sign a confidentiality agreement to keep on record. One of the biggest challenges of maintaining confidentiality within the search is avoiding off-the-cuff informal comments search committee members may make to colleagues. It is recommended to keep the process as focused and self-contained as possible and advise search committee members to avoid discussing the specifics of the search with anyone outside the search committee until finalists are announced. While it is important to maintain confidentiality about the search committee deliberations, it is equally important to share general information about the search with the larger Division/Department which will later play a role in evaluating candidates.

4. Discuss roles and expectations of the search committee members

Broadly, the search committee's role is to recruit, screen, and recommend the best candidates for a needed position. Committee members should know what is expected of them in terms of attending meetings, building the applicant pool, evaluating applicants. Committee members should also recognize that participation in a search will require considerable time and effort. Some of the roles or expectations for search committee members include the following:

- Provide input on recruitment strategies
- Publicize the search
- Recruit diverse applicants
- Develop evaluation criteria

- Develop a list of interview questions
- Interview candidates
- Host candidates who interview on campus
- Assemble welcome packages for interviewees
- Ensure that the search process is fair and equitable
- Maintain confidentiality
- Develop an initial mentoring plan for the new faculty member. It's never too late to start thinking about mentoring since the search committee members provide a wonderful in-dept review of the individual's strengths, potential, and areas for improvement.

5. Identify a point person to manage all logistics and administrative work

In order to run an effective search it is very important to keep in mind that you will need a administrative point person to schedule meetings, put welcome packages together for interviewees, collect the evaluations for each candidate, assist with Itineraries as well as be the guest for campus visits. The Department of Medicine Chair's office has resources and guidelines for recruitment. See link below

<https://www.uab.edu/medicine/dom/faculty-staff/recruitment>

6. Raise and discuss issues of diversity

All committee members should by now received the Unconscious Bias training and educational resources that increase their knowledge of the impact of evaluation biases and ways to overcome them.

In order to build a diverse pool of applicants, it is essential to strive consciously to reach this goal, as it may not be achieved by simply advertising an open position. One of the first steps towards developing a commitment to engage actively in efforts to build a diverse applicant pool is to hold an open discussion of diversity at the beginning of the search. It is too late to address the issue when and if you are asked, "Why are there no women or minorities on your final list?" Frequently, search committees answer this question by claiming that "there weren't any women or minority applicants," or "there weren't any good ones". One goal of the search should be to ensure that there are outstanding women and minority scholars in the pool of applicants.

One possible way of initiating conversations about diversity and excellence is to ask search committee members to articulate their reasons for why it is important to recruit a diverse pool of applicants.

Search committee members can also discuss challenges they may face in achieving a diverse applicant pool and discuss search committees' efforts to recruit excellent and diverse applicant pools.

Some strategies for developing the applicant pool you want is to attend conference sessions given by younger, up-and-coming researchers whom you may not yet know as well as attending receptions hosted by special interest groups for women and minority scholars. Another strategy is to identify and consult with institutions (or individuals) that are especially successful at producing women and minority graduates or postdoctoral fellows etc in your field. Consult with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, who are often well positioned to help you reach highly qualified women and minority candidates. Be open to consider a candidate who come from institutions outside your immediate peer group, particularly women and minorities who may be publishing interesting work and who are perhaps under-placed.

Be aware and discuss how unconscious Bias can affect candidate evaluations. Search committee members often give preference to applicants they know, whose advisors or mentors they know, or who hold a degree from their own alma mater or one of a small number of elite institutions. One approach can be to identify “equity advisers” who can serve on search committees in divisions or departments other than their own and provide input about appropriate procedures.

If your department or division website doesn’t include text and images that promote an inclusive environment, this is the time to discuss steps to be taken to make improvements

7. Discuss what “excellence” means for the position you are seeking to fill

Begin to discuss and build consensus about the qualities and qualifications needed for this position and about the relative weight of each criteria. Resist the temptation to wait to develop evaluation criteria until after reviewing application materials. Failure to discuss and agree upon desired qualifications may hamper the effectiveness of your recruiting activities and increase the possibility that individual search committee members will favor candidates for reasons not necessarily related to the needs of the department or the position and will develop or give preferential weight to evaluation criteria that benefit favored candidates. (examples, “I know the advisor”, “I graduated from the same program, “I work in a closely related research area”). Be prepared to counter the argument that “we all know quality when we see it”. All too often, nebulous definitions of quality or excellence prime us to recognize quality in those who look and act similar to the majority of members already in an organization and hinder us from seeing excellence in those who differ in some way from the majority

Anticipate problems

Despite good faith efforts to gain the support and active involvement of all search committee members, meetings and search activities may not proceed as smoothly or effectively as desired. Keep in mind that all committee members share responsibility for everyone’s full engagement in the search. Some common problems that former search committees have identified, along with resources that may help overcome them, are listed below: the formatting below is off, just needs cleaned up

1 Resistance to efforts to enhance diversity

- Allow all members of the search committee to voice their opinions and participate in a discussion on diversity and the search committee’s roles and responsibilities in recruiting and evaluating a diverse pool of applicants.

- Reminds the search committee that they represent the interests of the department as a whole and, in a broader context, the interests of the school or college, and the university.
- Stress that failure to recruit and fairly evaluate a diverse pool of applicants may jeopardize the search, that it may be too late to address the issue when (or if) you are asked, “Why are there no women or minorities on your finalist list?”

2 One member dominates the meetings

- Review or establish ground rules that encourage participation from all members.
- Structure the committee’s discussions by carefully framing questions to solicit multiple viewpoints. Very general questions invite wide-ranging, open-ended discussions that provide opportunities for highly verbal and/or opinionated individuals to control the direction of the conversation. Instead ask a more specific question such as “what are the strengths of each application received?”
- If someone is dominating the discussion, acknowledge and briefly summarize his or her viewpoint and then ask for alternative viewpoints from other members.
- If necessary, talk privately with the individual about the importance of providing other committee members with opportunities to participate in discussion.

3 Power dynamics of the group prevent some members from fully participating

Although a search committee composed of a diverse group of individuals is recommended for its ability to incorporate diverse views and perspectives into your search, it is important to recognize that this diversity also poses challenges. Differences in the status and power of the members of your search committee may influence their participation. Junior faculty members, for example, may be reluctant to disagree with senior faculty members who may later evaluate them for tenure or promotion. Minority and/or women search committee members may not be comfortable if they are the only members of the search committee who advocate for applicants from underrepresented groups. Search committee chairs should evaluate committee members’ interactions to assess whether power imbalances are influencing the search and search committee members should bring their concerns about any power imbalances to the chair.

Concluding meetings

1. Assign specific tasks to committee members

At the end of each meeting, give each committee member a “to do” list to be done before the next meeting and it can be any of the following where the chair could ask each committee member to:

- list a specific number of qualities they would like to see in an ideal candidate
- write or review a job description or announcement or advertisement
- Identify or contact a specified number of sources who can refer potential candidates
- Suggest a certain number of venues for posting job announcements

2. Remind committee members of their assigned tasks

When sending out the email reminder for the next meeting, include the items to be done and ask them to let you know in advance if they've run into problems.

Committee members should accept responsibility for completing their assignments and be prepared to report on their activities at the next meeting.

3. Hold committee members accountable

The chair should ask each committee member to report on his or her search activities at every committee meeting.

References:

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