

Faculty hiring: a buyer's market and we're the sellers

USC Dornsife
Academic Culture and Well-Being

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Choices made in faculty hiring reflect the values and beliefs of the faculty making them. Faculty hiring is the vehicle to either maintain a status quo or to strengthen the department to meet the ever-changing landscape of academia.

Choices made will determine whether faculty feel connected to the department or each other, whether faculty feel included or out of place.

Choices made reach far beyond the goal numerical representation and are intimately linked to the existential well-being and future of a department.

Not all departments are starting at the same place, and not all departments need the same support or same strategy.

Consider your own department needs, composition, and goals and consider ways in which the following guidance may help you work toward a goal of continuous improvement to achieve your academic mission.

You are not alone in this, and consultation is encouraged throughout the process.

Abstract

These best practices are informed by current available national best practices as well as qualitative data collected from Dornsife faculty.

These best practices are also informed by a review of current higher education hiring literature, psychological and sociological research.

Included are **sample texts and language that can be copied for use by Dornsife faculty** in discussions among faculty and job postings.

- We should conceptualize hiring and retention in tandem and remember that **we are asking whole people to join a community**, not simply offering a job to a newly minted Ph.D.
 - Do departments have a strong enough sense of who those “whole people” are, what they value, and what they need?
 - Departments are advised to **adopt a “buyer’s market” mentality** and critically assess what about a department composition, practices, policies, messaging, and norms appeal to current faculty on the market.
- We should acknowledge the high subjectivity of the process and center our academic goals as our north star.
- We should move away from a numerical or quantitative perspective of “diversity in hiring,” and base our strategy in the understanding that scholarship is improved when we hire across the spectrum of scholarship

Abstract

A key finding throughout conversations with Diversity Liaisons was the issue of buy-in.

Those departments that succeeded at meeting stated goals for hiring retained a belief that the strength of the department's scholarship was the core issue, not a numerical count of identities.

Moreover, those departments that still leveraged a view of "representation" from a quantitative perspective remained locked in a false-choice battle between "excellence" and "diversity" which results in the department enduring ineffective or divisive searches.

If departments are struggling to build a representative faculty, they are advised to have frank conversations about the content on the previous slide and chart a course forward.

Key elements of an effective hiring strategy are:

- A collective motivation rooted in scholarship, **and** a shared commitment to building a culture that can retain faculty who are recruited.
- **Structured, equitable, and repeatable** hiring process that is understood to be subjective (because humans are involved), but with every effort made to be objective; use data to track progress that comes from changes to the process
- Commitment runs deep. **If a short list does not allow the department to meet its stated academic goals, then consider the process failed.**

“Diversity”

The language we use matters. While we may use language like “diversity hire” to reflect practices rather than people, the language subconsciously frames how we read applications, engage in interviews, and vote.

Complicating the issue is the use of the term in the role of “diversity liaison.” For many departments, it is a crucial role that may be a lone voice in advocating within a search, where for other departments, the shared mission is so clear that each member of the department serves as a de facto “diversity liaison” because they are aligned in their vision of what comprises a strong and productive department is.

Rather than “diversity hires,” departments should approach each search with a stated mission to hire the best candidate that allows the department to meet its academic goals.

The continued use of the term “diversity hire” is complicated. In practical terms, it can be a shorthand method of recognizing the importance of building a heterogenous faculty, or “hiring for diversity.”

In sociocultural terms, and for those who would seek to undermine the practice, it conveys a strong message that a candidate is only qualified based on an identity they hold and not the strength of their scholarship, ability to connect with students, or the contributions they would make to the department.

Departments and search committees are advised to consider the language they use and the way in which language shapes discussions, assessment of candidates, and votes.

“Diversity Liaisons” should view their role as a leader in the search process with the courage and skillset to help faculty be more self-reflective and self-aware as they participate in a search process. Diversity Liaisons can do more than just post to job boards, they can help their colleagues gain insight, take new perspectives, and forge collegial connections through alignment around a shared goal, of strengthening the academic capacity of the department.

Diversity Liaisons should be empowered to contact deans and other senior leadership for guidance any time throughout the process.

What is legal?

This question arose more in those departments that still maintained a **quantitative** view of the issue, where faculty remained mired in the erroneous debate between “excellence” and “diversity.”

When a department had a clear goal to hire the best candidates that would allow them to best meet the needs of their diverse student body **and** expand and strengthen their overall scholarship as a department, there were not questions of legality in the hiring of exceptional candidates. The faculty were united in their view that advancing scholarship was central to any effort.

Challenge the false choice and shift from either/or to both/and.

We do not discriminate based on protected identities.

We are clear about our academic mission and hire the best and brightest faculty who will allow us to achieve said mission.

What is your mission?

To the right are different perspectives on what can guide a department's approach to hiring that position academics as the north star.

These statements can be used in response to false-choice arguments, because they continue to center motivation on tandem goals of scholarship and meeting student needs, two cornerstones of USC Dornsife.

Expectations of students and new faculty reflect social and generational shifts and places the onus on departments to both understand how those expectations play out in an academic setting, and how to adapt to meet those needs.

Motivations come from different places, but the end result of a stronger department is what matters.

- *We succeed at our academic mission when we intentionally build and support a heterogeneous faculty community that can effectively connect with and inspire an evolving student population.*
- *Scholarship is strengthened when there are diverse people asking novel research questions, drawing on different bases of knowledge and diverse backgrounds, to enhance, and advance, our understanding of an area of study.*
- *One of the biggest challenges facing all faculty today is the effective management of challenging dialogues in class that run the risk of going off the rails, or worse, going viral. We should be prioritizing any applicant who demonstrates skill in managing these types of challenging dialogues from the outset.*
- *Shift the dialogue from a quantitative view of the issue (e.g. "diversity hires") to a needs-based discussion that centers the needs of the UG/GS communities, needs of the department to increase enrollment, needs to diversify subfields of study, or develop/strengthen an emergent area (e.g., AI).*

A buyer's market.

(You're the seller.)

The market is shifting. Research into the "pipeline problem" reveals that there has been a net increase in women and faculty of color graduating with doctorates over the last several years, but **the academy has struggled to entice them to join their ranks. Money matters, but only so much.**

What does matter to this generation is the opportunity to live their lives as whole people.

Shifting values and perspectives on purpose and engagement have resulted in a generation of emerging scholars who **want to achieve great things professionally, while cultivating other dimensions of themselves, their families, and their lives.**

They are willing to sacrifice much to achieve this balance. They are also more willing to select a place of employment based on the degree to which they see their personal values reflected, particularly, a commitment to diversity.

- Remember, you're hiring people, not filling a role.
- Do you know what your candidates value, and are you building up your capacity in those areas to best meet their needs and goals at the intersection of the personal and the professional
- "Faculty of color shouldn't have to work harder to find a community here."
- Dornsife Faculty Diversity Liaison

Recommendations for process

To the right are follows are recommendations for each stage of a hiring process.

As previously noted, each department is different and may require a different strategy at various stages throughout a process.

At minimum, the Department Chair, Search Chair, and Diversity Liaison(s) should be aligned in their shared commitment to engage in an equitable and effective search to best meet the needs of the students, scholarship, the Department, and Dornsife.

This group should also **commit to a robust defense against the false choice of “excellence v. diversity” at every step** and **be prepared** with sample language included in this guide to help them in discussions.

Critically, this group is reminded that each of their colleagues may be motivated by different things, and **it is not wise to presume that only one motivator (e.g., moral; righting historical wrongs; quantitative; scholarship) will be effective for all**. Members of this core group should be skilled in **listening first, identifying concerns**, fears, and hesitation, **and then working with their faculty as collaborators** to move toward an agreeable solution.

Seek consultation as much as is needed.

What is your process?

In surveying Dornsife faculty about hiring experiences, **those who spoke of a more structured and organized process reported a smoother overall experience with less discord among faculty members.**

Key to effective efforts were ones in which faculty were given equal opportunity to share their perspectives, allowing the search committee to take a more informed approach.

Departments that struggled either did not have a structured process in place or did not stick with their stated process; **deviations then contributed to a sense of unfairness.**

If there is a process in place, stick with it, lest deviation and claims of fraud undermine an already difficult undertaking.

There is abundant and comprehensive best practice guidance which is listed below:

- [Harvard University: Best practices for conducting faculty searches](#)
- [Yale University: Inclusive faculty searches: Best Practices](#)
- [UCLA Searching for Excellence: Evidence-based strategies for equitable and inclusive faculty hiring](#)
- [University of Michigan Handbook for Faculty Searches and Hiring](#)
- [O'Meara et al. \(2020\). Nudging toward diversity: applying behavioral design to faculty hiring.](#)
- [Sensoy & DiAngelo \(2017\). "We Are All for Diversity, but . . .": How faculty hiring committees reproduce whiteness and practical suggestions for how they can change](#)

First impressions

You are trying to hire folks who have lived much of their lives connected to a digital world. **They view websites and social media at windows into what is valued by the organization.**

If your website does not reflect what they personally value, they will not feel that connection that they are seeking.

Every top college and university is in competition with each other to build a representative and heterogenous faculty that strengthens scholarship and best meets the needs of an emergent student population.

Digital presence is not trivial, and given the stakes, we must not leave any stone unturned or opportunity for advantage wasted.

- Take the **perspective of your applicants**, and then critique your department website, media, communications, and programs by asking the following questions (from the perspective of the applicant):
 - “Do I see myself and my values reflected here?”
 - “Are they inviting a diverse range of faculty to speak at their colloquia?”
 - “Are they speaking my language?”
 - “What are they telling me they value?”
- Consider asking students, faculty, or staff from within and outside the department for their perspective on your department materials

The Search Committee

Unsurprisingly, the **composition of the search committee was noted by Diversity Liaisons as one of the most important decisions made that shapes the outcome of the search.**

This is an even greater factor in departments that lack a shared commitment to fielding a representative faculty that meets the scholarship and teaching needs of a shifting student cohort.

As the actions of any group reflect those individuals, their values, and their commitment, the alignment of the search committee is essential.

Yet, even with a shared commitment, the committee members must be staunch defenders of a structured process and ensure adherence to whatever search process the department commits to.

- Dept Chair, Search Chair, Diversity Liaisons aligned in a shared mission before job posting is written
- Ensure mixed representation of rank, gender, ethnicity on the committee
- Consider shift to two-person Diversity Liaison model to spread the workload and also ensure that faculty in role are not the only women or faculty of color on the committee
- Ensure that the Diversity Liaison(s) are not the sole “enforcers” or advocates for the importance of fielding a diverse faculty

Job Description

Remember back to the First Impressions slide and the importance of signaling what is valued.

There is abundant literature that highlights the importance of **key words, language, and phrasing** that is important to consider when writing.

In hiring a whole person – **who more than ever, is basing important life decisions on their values as a person** – your job description is your first opportunity to say to them, “we are hiring expert scholars but recognize that when they feel connected to a department, feel they belong, and are supported, they will produce better quality scholarship.”

What you are doing is selling quality of life, not just a job opportunity.

- Who is your audience, and are you speaking to them? Remember, it’s a buyer’s market and you are the seller.
- See the job description as a statement of your department values just as much as an invitation for application; **your applicants are sizing up your department based on the language you use**
- **Be intentional** about the language used to solicit teaching, research, and diversity statements (if applicable) so that they become more effective tools for assessing a candidate’s philosophy and experience

Job Description

Consider this sample language.

Feel free to use these examples in your own job postings and edit to reflect the identity and goals of your own department.

- “Successful candidates will be able to demonstrate how they address contemporary and sometimes divisive social issues in classroom dialogues and their approach to creating inclusive and respectful conversations in an academic setting.”
- “We are seeking candidates who will leverage their role as a scholar to address issues of representation and access in our field.”
- “Successful faculty will be able to identify specific ways they facilitate intellectual, and respectful dialogue across the diverse populations of their classrooms.”
- “Successful candidates will demonstrate experience and interest in connecting with and mentoring an increasingly diverse student population whose research interests lie at the intersection of our field and social justice and equity.”
- “Successful candidates should be able to articulate how they consider the appropriate application of their scholarship to diverse communities, cultures, and research questions.”
- “Successful candidates will help the department best meet the needs of a diverse student population including 1st Generation students.”
- “Successful candidates will be able to demonstrate a track record of service to their academic departments or schools that addresses broader issues in higher education including but not limited to accessibility, representation, or culture.”
- “Successful candidates will be able to demonstrate a strong track record of concrete engagement to create a strong, inclusive community at their previous institutions, and be able to articulate how they would specifically continue to build an inclusive department at USC.”

The First Cut

The structure by which you begin your assessment will shape how your committee moves through the process.

One of the most important elements of this stage of the process is self-awareness. Remember that at best, you are trying to place some objective guardrails around a highly subjective process.

Consider engaging in a 10-minute discussion with the committee and ask them to reflect on their own personal definitions of “success” and consider their own path of hardship and success to get where they are today.

Ask them to try seeing themselves as a candidate in today’s world **and what invisible strengths they would hope a committee would see in them.**

- Establish rubric or areas for assessment and how you will be weighting each before review
 - This **weighting process is crucial**, as both research and Diversity Liaisons reflect that while certain qualities of a candidate may be important early, motivation can often shift later in a process
- When reviewing candidates, assess their track record and future capacity **given the candidate’s individual background, resources, connections, and experiences**
 - **Take a “within-subjects” mindset** to assessment at this stage rather than between; consider each candidate relative to themselves not others
- **Consider adding a few more candidates** for a 30-minute Zoom interview who may fall outside your “traditional” profile, as the opportunity to meet them may provide valuable information
 - Consider a model in which each member of the committee is responsible for bringing an additional 1-2 candidates to the table from groups underrepresented in the field and search for the X-Factor that might be hidden

The Short List and Interviews

Departments must not engage in “short list revision,” a phenomenon in which a short list is created, it is then recognized that the short list does not allow a department to meet its stated academic goals, and there is a subsequent reconsideration of candidates for addition.

This practice, beyond being legally dubious, is ethically unsound. It reflects entrenched beliefs about what is “excellent,” and ensures that even if a list is “revised,” any added candidate bears the mark of the “diversity candidate,” unfairly tainting their addition and potential subsequent inclusion in a faculty community.

Departments should engage in significant reflection and consultation if this happens.

- [Lucas, B.J., Berry, Z., Giurge, L.M. et al. \(2021\).](#)
- [Johnson, Hekman, & Chan \(2016\).](#)

- If the short list does not allow the department to meet the stated academic goals of the search, consider it failed.
- Longer lists, and having more than one member of a particular group on the list can increase the likelihood of selecting a person from that group
- Ensure equity in the in-person interview experience:
 - Remind of tone and tenor in Q&A
 - Establish consistent process of who will ask questions and how
 - Consider important campus partners outside the department

The Short List and Interviews

Remember that this is your opportunity to demonstrate your values as a department by which questions you choose to ask. Also, **remember that the candidates will be assessing your department** for dynamics of power, collegiality, respect, and the degree to which they will feel included.

Department culture is reflected in who gets to ask questions in job talks, the respect with which they ask them, who passes the bread at lunch, where people sit, and who stands to shake a hand.

It is important to be as intentional as you are genuine at this stage and consider what the department can work on to improve. **This is a list of possible questions you can use in your interviews and adapt to your department.**

Show that you see them as whole people:

- So many of us have important moments in our lives that inform why we study/teach what we do. Please share with us yours, and how you see your sense of self connected with your work.
- One of the most important issues that faculty face today is the impact of the last few years on work-life balance. Can you reflect on that for us?
- What are some of the challenges facing our field relative to issues of representation or equity, and how would you go about addressing those if you had the power to do so?

Research:

- Student engagement in research is important to us, and they are an increasingly diverse group. Can you share with us how you have specifically worked to create an inclusive culture in your lab?
- Can you reflect on ways your research intersects with current social, political, environmental challenges of the day, many of which are connected to issues of equity and accessibility (e.g., environmental equity relative to global warming).

Teaching:

- A key challenge for faculty is how to handle potentially challenging classroom dialogues around a host of hot-button issues. Can you share your strategy or approach for establishing a conversation that is inclusive of different student viewpoints.

The Final Vote

This is it. Make good on your commitment to your process, the hard work of your faculty, staff, and the applicant.

Build a department best equipped to guide your field and the academy into the next century of humanistic and scientific inquiry.

- Remind faculty of the rubric, weights, and goals of the search (the academic mission)
- Establish guidance for discussing candidates including:
 - Dept Chair, Search Chair, and Diversity Liaisons all sharing responsibility to moderate an equitable, respectful, and fair process
 - Roundtable model in which all faculty speak once for a set period of time before faculty are allowed to speak again
 - Faculty to provide concrete rationale (as concrete as possible) for their assessments

The Pitch

Remember, you're pitching to a whole person, with a set of values, needs, and goals both personal and professional.

If you do not know what they value, your pitch will only speak to a part of who they are. If you don't feel like your pitch speaks to the whole person, then consider revising the types of questions you ask at the interview stage.

This is not about being invasive, but about paying attention. With what topics do they speak passionately about? About what in their professional life do they have the courage to be humble and see they need growth; and then how can you engage with them in a way that tells them the department will help them grow there?

If you haven't paid attention to the whole person, you will not succeed.

- Ensure you have consulted with your Divisional Dean about all potential resources to build a competitive offer
 - Housing, Provost funds, postdoc positions
- Money matters, which mean you must not ignore the "whole person" perspective, and be sure to highlight:
 - How the department supports not only faculty tenure but personal growth via USC, Dornsife, and Departmental resources for the building of faculty community, connection across departments

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- Identify specific ways in which the candidate's professional and personal development will be supported:
 - Access and dedicated time to participate in New and Early Career Faculty resources and programs
 - Dedicated time to participate in USC trainings to enhance pedagogy (e.g., CET)
 - Funded memberships in professional organizations

Summary of Best Practices

Departments are encouraged to embrace a holistic view of building a department rather than just hiring roles.

If departments are successful in building a strong, representative, inclusive, and academically prestigious community, we will no longer need to ask the question 'how do we do better in hiring for diversity?' because we will be a destination.

Our goals should be to emerge as national leaders in our fields for the strength of its faculty community. **Departments can help themselves in hiring if they actively manage their reputation through positive action.**

In the areas of hiring discussed here, departments are urged to view faculty hiring as a “buyer’s market” and **be actively building a department that is attractive to potential candidates.** This is a much different mindset than what has dominated academic hiring for decades, in which departments with prestige had their pick of the best candidates available, and junior faculty would be so lucky as to receive an offer. That dynamic is shifting.

Departments must build programming, infrastructure, policy, and messaging that demonstrates their commitment to the values that faculty on the market currently hold: equity, justice, representation, service. **Departments can consider how they are raising awareness of issues of equity and access through their websites, social media messaging, faculty participation in podcasts, panels, hosting symposia on equity in the field, diverse speakers, and conferences dedicated to the issues that matter to the candidates.**

All of this – *when paired with actual work done in these areas* – sends strong, public messages, that the department values what a growing number of job candidates are valuing... and basing their decisions on.

Summary of Best Practices

As the saying goes, “build it and they will come.” Reframe the perspective of hiring **from “we want a more representative faculty,” to “why are we a place faculty would want to come in the first place?”**

Because of the generational shifts in what is valued and prioritized, departments must also adapt to make themselves marketable. While there will always be applicants for jobs, a central consideration must also be retention: **what are we building that will keep the best and brightest here?**

- Departments engage in a review of their policies, programs, initiatives, messaging, and internal culture to ensure they are aligned with recruitment and retention goals; this is an ongoing process
- Departments develop a structured process
- Upon approval of a tenure line, Department Chair, Search Chair, and Diversity Liaisons meet with Faculty Affairs, DD, or equivalent, to review current best practices and strategy, as well as current available resources from Dornsife and USC
- Search Committee executes the search with a commitment to their goals and strategy, seeking regular consultation on the way as needed
- Celebrate your success.