Part 4: Assessment

There are two key components to the effective assessment of job candidates:

1. a clear and consistent assessment rubric (i.e., the criteria by which you will evaluate candidates’ qualifications), and

2. a clear and consistent assessment plan (i.e., the process by which you will evaluate candidates and make selections).

Creating and Implementing an Assessment Rubric

The purpose of an assessment rubric is to ensure that all candidates are subject to the same evaluation criteria, and to ensure that members of search committees apply selection criteria consistently. Moreover, the criteria included in an assessment rubric should clearly reflect statements made in the job advertisement.

Ideally, the entire unit, rather than only the search committee, should participate in the creation of an assessment rubric to ensure that the unit’s values are represented. Minimally, the search committee should be assisted by unit leadership and by the unit’s diversity committee. The creation of an assessment rubric requires the search committee and the unit to define its selection criteria up front, preferably before or while writing the job advertisement and certainly before the committee begins its review of applications.

An assessment rubric also helps the committee and the unit clearly rank its selection criteria in terms of unit priorities—including the unit’s commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Some questions to consider:

- What are the unit’s goals for this particular hire in terms of research, teaching, service, and outreach?
- How is a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion a factor in each goal?
- How does the unit rank these goals in terms of first and second priorities?
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- What types of evidence will demonstrate prior achievement or future potential in each area?

- Does the job ad request materials appropriate to the assessment criteria?

Committees will need to consider how many distinct criteria will be useful in their assessment, and they will need to consider what kind of scale to employ. Some typical scales include:

- A simple choice of “High,” “Medium,” and “Low” rankings.

- A more elaborate choice of “Excellent,” “Good,” “Neutral,” “Fair,” “Deficient,” and “Unable to judge” rankings, or a numerical equivalent.

A range of sample assessment rubrics are available in the Toolkit.

Open Rank Searches

If the unit has been approved to conduct an “open rank” search (i.e., a position open to more than one rank of professor, such as “assistant or associate,” “associate or full,” or all three ranks), the committee and the unit will need to consider creating more than one assessment rubric, since different qualities and/or experiences may be expected or desired from candidates at different stages of their careers (e.g., in terms of leadership, administrative experience, or national service).

Creating and Implementing an Assessment Plan to Work Against Bias

Before any applications are reviewed, the committee should have agreed upon an explicit plan for how it will conduct its business in a fair and consistent manner. Some questions to ask:

- When will the committee begin reading and ranking applications? As applications come in? Or after the priority deadline?

- Should all committee members read and assess the same materials at the same stage of the search process?

- How will committee members handle potential conflicts of interest, such as a prior relationship with a candidate or with a candidate’s adviser?

- By what process will the committee come to a decision about its short list? Will members vote, for example, or work to achieve consensus?

- At what point in the process will the committee review or request references?
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- Will the committee conduct preliminary interviews? If so, will these be on site at a conference, over the phone, by Skype, or by some other electronic means?

- By what process will the committee create its list of finalists to invite to campus?

- How will the committee organize the campus visits?

- By what process will the committee make its final assessments and recommendations to the unit?

- How will the committee communicate with applicants and with the larger unit at each stage of the process?

In addition to the criteria detailed in your assessment rubric, some key issues to consider include:

“Early Bird” Bias. Beware of over-valuating applications that arrive early in the process, or simply giving them more attention. It can be helpful to wait until the priority deadline before reading any applications, and to organize applications by some method other than order of arrival.

“Moving Target” Syndrome. Beware of changing the requirements for the position as the search proceeds in order to include or exclude particular candidates. The terms of the job ad and the criteria of the assessment rubric should be consistently applied. **It may be helpful to designate a point during the process to evaluate the usefulness of the assessment criteria and the consistency of their application.** How well are the criteria working?

Implicit Bias. All of us are affected by unconscious bias, the stereotypes and preconceptions about social groups stored in our brains that can influence our behavior toward members of those groups, both positively and negatively, without our conscious knowledge. One well-documented example is our tendency to feel more comfortable with those we perceive as “just like us” (so-called in-group bias), and numerous studies show that in situations of evaluation members of dominant groups are typically rated more highly than others, even when credentials are identical. This occurs regardless of the evaluator’s background—male or female, majority population or racial minority. **It is therefore crucial to consider the potential impact that implicit bias may have on the evaluation process.**

Some factors that can trigger implicit bias **against** particular candidates, whether or not they meet advertised selection criteria:
● Non-traditional career paths.
● Non-traditional research interests or methodologies.
● Degrees from less historically prestigious institutions.
● Prior work experience at less prestigious or lower-ranked institutions.
● Do not appear to “fit” the unit’s existing profile (e.g., in terms of gender, age, background, interests, and so forth).

Some factors that can trigger implicit bias in favor of particular candidates, whether or not they meet advertised selection criteria:

● Traditional career paths.
● Traditional research interests and methodologies.
● Degrees from historically prestigious institutions.
● Prior work experience at prestigious or highly-ranked institutions.
● Appear to “fit” the unit’s existing profile (e.g., in terms of gender, age, background, interests, and so forth). This is sometimes referred to as “cloning”—replicating the current unit profile in new hires.

Implicit bias is more likely to affect our decision making when we are tired, in a hurry, feeling overworked or distracted, or uncertain of exactly what we should do—in other words, under the typical conditions of serving on a search committee.

Attention to implicit bias can help committees to acknowledge the value of candidates who are less obviously “like us” and thus to consider their possible positive contributions to the unit. Attention to implicit bias can also encourage committees to openly discuss how members define concepts like “merit,” “quality,” and “excellence.” Does the committee assume that merit, quality, excellence, and related concepts have singular definitions? And does the committee assume that definitions for these concepts are the same for all members?

Resources and case studies about implicit bias are available in the Toolkit.

**In sum, it is important to consider:**

● At which stage(s) of the assessment process will you apply the assessment rubric?

● How will you ensure that agreed upon criteria are applied consistently for all applicants at all appropriate stages of the assessment process?

● How will you work to minimize the potential impact of implicit bias?
Preliminary Interviews

In many fields it is conventional practice to conduct preliminary interviews with a “long” short list—perhaps 8 to 10, or up to as many as 15 candidates—before determining which 2 to 4 to bring to campus as finalists. To help make interviews consistent, fair, and effective:

- It is best to conduct all interviews in the same format and under similar conditions—whether in person, over the phone, or over Skype—including interviews with internal candidates.
- It is best to have the same committee members present for all interviews.
- It is best to ask the same set of standard questions, in the same order.
- All candidates should be asked questions about diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Make sure all interview questions comply with federal and state hiring laws and university policies. (These are available on the EOAA website.)

A guide to “fair” and “unfair” inquiries is available in the Toolkit.

A guide to interviewing candidates with disabilities is available in the Toolkit.

On-campus Interviews

The on-campus interview is a component of the assessment process, but it is also the beginning of the recruitment process, and thus it should involve not only the search committee but also the larger unit, the college or school, and your campus and community allies.

Hosting the Campus Visit

The campus visit is not only a time for candidates to showcase their professional and scholarly pursuits; it is also an opportunity for the unit to make candidates feel welcomed in a new community.

In addition to the traditional job talk, research seminar, and/or teaching demonstration; meetings with the chair or director, other department leaders, and graduate students; meals with colleagues; a meeting with the appropriate dean or chancellor; and a tour of the campus, elements of a campus visit should include:
• Providing candidates with a detailed itinerary for the visit, as far in advance as possible. All itineraries should be similar to ensure equitable treatment, including itineraries for internal candidates.

• Introducing candidates to relevant faculty, staff, students, and administrators within and outside the unit with whom they might share research, teaching, service, and/or outreach interests. How can you help candidates imagine local professional networks and relationships?

• Asking candidates if they would like to visit relevant research centers, facilities, or other campus resources, and/or to meet with a human resources or benefits officer. It is best to create a list of resources candidates can review before they travel to campus.

• Providing venues for candidates to ask questions they might not feel comfortable asking the search committee or unit leadership (e.g., questions about spousal or partner hiring, maternity leave or family medical leave, stopping the tenure clock, disability accommodations, resources for childcare or eldercare, unit or campus climate toward women and minorities, and so forth). The meeting with a dean or chancellor can be an opportunity for these kinds of questions if it is clear they can be asked in confidence.

• Maintaining clear and open communication with candidates. It is important to be honest about written or unwritten expectations for the position, as well as issues surrounding funding, space, or other resources.

• Explaining to candidates the unit’s and the relevant college, school, or campus’s expectations about teaching, research, service, and the promotion and tenure process.

• Introducing candidates to relevant college and campus resources for their success.

A sample list of campus resources is available in the Toolkit.