Department Chair Online Resource Center

Considerations in Recruiting Full-time, Tenure-eligible Faculty

Irene W.D. Hecht, Senior Associate, American Council on Education. "Considerations in Recruiting Full-time, Tenure-eligible Faculty." Written specifically for the ACE Department Chair Online Resource Center, 2003.

The search for full-time tenure-track faculty is a complex and protracted process. Once a relatively casual activity based on professional networking, the steps today are carefully defined and carry legal implications.

The usual steps in a search for full-time faculty are:

- Definition of need at the department level.
- Authorization for a search.
- Creation of the search strategy.
- Formation of a search committee.
- Establishment of search mechanics.
- Creation of an initial applicant pool.
- Completion of telephone interviews.
- Review of the finalists pool.
- Recommendations for campus visits.
- Implementation of campus visits.
- Making the offer.

Define the need at the department level. The time is long past when a department could assume that when a tenure-track position was vacated, the department should make an identical replacement. Today, a vacated position triggers a re-examination of the department's needs, the projected development of the discipline, the goals and interests of students, and the social, economic, and public needs for particular areas of specialization.

It is also wise to scan the institutional environment. What are the institution's budgetary considerations? What other departments are looking to replace members or augment their current faculty? Are there opportunities to collaborate around a position with a cognate department?

The more thoroughly a department examines the external and internal environments, before it presents a request to fill a position, the better the case it can make for launching a search.

Get authorization for a search. The institution defines the authorization process. It may involve the Promotion and Tenure Committee and/or the dean or provost. As department chair, you carry the request for authorization and must therefore be aware of institutional procedures. Make no move to publicly advertise a search until you have the necessary authorization.

Create the search strategy. Though often overlooked, the existence of a published strategy can spell the difference between success and failure. The search strategy weaves together all the succeeding steps in the process, linking them to a specific timetable. While schedule adjustments are inevitable as the process unfolds, an explicit written schedule will make it easier for adjustments to be made in ways that will keep the overall process on track.

Ideally, you, as the department chair, should lay out the strategy, working with the dean or provost to coordinate with their schedules as needed. Whether or not you serve on the search committee, you should attend the first committee meeting to review the strategy, leaving a print copy with each committee member.

While a schedule for the search process is vital, the committee must understand from the outset that the heart of the strategy is to create the best possible pool of candidates. This means going beyond advertising in the usual public venues, such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and appropriate disciplinary journals. The search should extend to individual university networks—and, for some fields, to community resources.

Form a search committee. Unless a department is very small (up to about six full-time faculty), there must be a selection process for the search committee members. You may wish to include someone from a cognate department, particularly if the position will call for interdisciplinary teaching. Institutional procedures might permit or require a student representative on the search committee. In any case, it is essential that the selection process for the search committee be rational, transparent, and devoid of political maneuvering.

The selection of a committee chair is also important. Will you, as department chair, serve on the committee? If so, will you also chair it? Assuming you are not *de facto* the search chair, how will that chair be chosen? Will that person be elected by the committee, selected by the department chair, or appointed by the dean?

What will be the reporting line from the committee? If you head the search, you will take the committee recommendations to the dean. If you are not on the search committee, you, as department chair, will receive the committee recommendations and carry them to the dean. If you are not on the committee, you should arrange for regular reports from the committee chair. Those reporting times should appear on the strategy schedule.

Determine search mechanics. Because of possible legal liability, the handling of applications is very important. All applications must go to one central place—often the departmental office. On arrival, each application must be logged and dated, a task often done by the department secretary. It should be routine to acknowledge receipt of an application. This is often done with a printed form indicating what materials have been received and what may still be outstanding.

The committee must determine where they will read the applications and how security will be maintained. As they complete telephone calls or interviews, search committee members need to add their notes to the candidate's file. Copies of any institutional correspondence should also go in the candidate's file.

Create initial applicant pool. Designate when the committee will meet to review all applications and leads to winnow them down to a specified number for initial telephone interviews. Procedures here can vary with the size of the pool. If the pool is modest, all committee members can be expected to read all the files. A large pool might have to be divided alphabetically among the group.

The first reading will focus on eliminating applications that do not meet the search criteria. All the committee may then need to read a winnowed pool to select who will be contacted for a telephone interview.

Conduct telephone interviews. The search committee members must agree upon a telephone protocol so that each interviewer asks the same basic questions. The institution may have such a template. If not, it is important to set up an interview sheet so that when the committee meets, it will have a pool of common information on each potential candidate. This preliminary process creates a pool of finalists from which the campus visitors will be chosen.

Scrutinize the finalists pool. The vetting of the finalists pool is more extensive than the earlier sorting processes. At this stage, the committee needs to contact references to learn more about the candidate. Again, it is important to have a telephone protocol to ensure that the same basic questions are asked about each candidate.

Recommend choices for campus visits. From this finalists pool, the committee selects its candidates for a campus interview. The dean determines how many can be invited, but the number is likely to be an understood institutional policy. Generally at least three candidates can be invited, although an institution may agree to invite more. When the committee has selected the candidates for a campus visit, you, as department chair, will usually carry the recommendations to the dean, along with the candidate files. The recommendations should suggest a timetable for the visits. You need to keep track of the dean's and provost's schedules to be sure they are on campus when the candidates visit.

Once the visits have been approved, institutional practice determines who issues the invitation. Whoever takes this step needs to know the terms of the invitation, such as what expenses will be covered by the institution and which will not. Along with the invitation to visit the campus, candidates should be sent a proposed schedule, so they know what arrangements they must make. Also, send any campus material that has not been provided already.

Conduct campus visits. Although it is grueling for the committee, it is wise to schedule the visits as close together as possible. Try to complete the visits within a two-week period. This is probably the most fraught part of the process. The possibilities for disruption are legion. However, the existence of an agreed-upon ideal schedule is especially helpful when weather and personal circumstance force adjustments.

Make the offer. One of the great advantages of having an explicit schedule is that during the campus visit, you can give the candidate a notion of the pace of the search. Candidates may also tell you what other visits or offers they have pending.

Although the dean or provost generally makes the employment offer, the chair plays a crucial role in the process of wooing the candidate. Once the offer is made, you may contact and sound out the candidate. A call from the chair can impress upon the candidate that the department really wants him/her to come. After all, it is the department that will be the person's future "intellectual home." The dean or provost may be the legal link to the institution, but the new faculty member will interact daily with the members of the department. The support of those future colleagues will be important to any candidate considering a position.