The success of any department depends on the quality of the people hired, and one of the department chair’s most important responsibilities is conducting or supervising employment searches. Much has been written about interviewing candidates, increasing diversity, and following legal guidelines, but little attention has been paid to checking applicants’ references. Reference checks are just as vital to hiring good employees as candidate interviews, because these checks are usually the only means of obtaining information that does not come directly from the candidate. Search committee members often believe little can be gained from checking references due to past experiences where perfunctory calls were only made to listed references. However, when done correctly, reference checks provide invaluable information. As communication scholars with experience on dozens of search committees, we have discovered that the following guidelines help ensure that search committee members obtain the information needed to make high-quality hiring decisions.

Begin by obtaining the applicant’s written permission to check listed and unlisted references. We recommend you email all top applicants, request permission to contact references, and inquire if there is anyone you should not contact and why. Ask for email addresses for listed references.

Determine whom to contact by examining the candidate’s credentials and letters of reference. By carefully examining a vita, you can identify people not listed by the applicant who are in a good position to provide information, such as former supervisors, subordinates, or colleagues who have worked closely with the applicant. For example, if an applicant was part of a grant team and the grant director is not listed as a reference, you should contact that person. Also, by reviewing the vita, you can identify those in your network of associates familiar with the candidate’s record.

Next, examine the recommendation letters. Even though many letters overstate candidates’ abilities, they can still be helpful if critically examined. Make a list of the topics covered. What is not said may be more important than what is. If three letter writers note that they are most familiar with a candidate’s service and scholarship and will address only these, be suspicious about the omission of teaching. Also separate inferences from facts. What evidence is used to support the letter writer’s praise? If a writer claims the applicant is an outstanding scholar but gives no support for this, be suspicious.

Based on this examination, decide which letter writers, if any, should be contacted. Although many argue that contacting letter writers is unproductive, we disagree. Asking the reference who did not address teaching to share what she or he hears from students and colleagues about the person’s teaching can

provide helpful information. In addition, writers can provide the names of others who are well positioned to comment on the candidate’s abilities. For example, perhaps you learn that a reference has been the candidate’s supervisor for only six months. The reference can then provide the name of the previous supervisor.

Before you bring anyone to campus, we recommend that you contact at least two unlisted references and a former or current supervisor of the candidate. Call additional references as needed.

**Prepare an interview guide to use when talking to references.** The interview guide consists of an opening, a series of logically organized, standardized questions to be asked of all applicants along with possible probes, a set of questions unique to each candidate based on the candidate’s credentials and relationship to the reference, and a conclusion. A well-prepared interview guide helps the interviewer to stay on track, follow up for full information, treat references comparably, and take helpful notes to share with other decision-makers. (We leave space between questions for note taking.)

Start by planning a few opening comments. Thank the reference and announce that the candidate has provided written permission to talk to listed and unlisted references. Let the reference know if more than one person will be on the line or if you will use a speakerphone. Then prepare easy-to-answer first questions such as, “What is your professional relationship to the candidate?” and “How long have you worked with the candidate?”

Before writing questions, review the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Guidelines. All questions must focus on bona fide occupational qualifications. For example, you may not ask if English is the applicant’s native language, but you may ask whether a candidate’s English proficiency is sufficient to clearly communicate complex information to students.

Now develop your set of standardized questions. Remember that you must ask the same core questions of all references so answers can be compared across candidates. Also remember to treat all candidates equally, so check references on internal candidates as well as external candidates.

Consider using some of the following questions which can easily be modified based on job requirements:

- Why is _____ looking for another position?
- How would you compare the teaching abilities of _____ with others who have had similar responsibilities?
- Compare _____’s ability to work effectively with faculty and staff to others who have had similar responsibilities.
• What are _____’s most significant contributions to your unit?

• Consider recent meetings you have been in with _____. How would you describe him or her as a communicator?

• Which of _____’s qualities and characteristics will be hardest to replace in your department?

• How do you think _____’s performance could have been improved?

• Did _____’s conduct ever require any corrective action such as supervisory intervention, reprimands, or disciplinary action?

We recommend that you end with the following questions:

• If you had the chance to rehire _____, what would be your hesitations?

• What else should our search committee know about _____’s professional performance and abilities?

When developing queries specific to each candidate, prepare questions to check the veracity of claims. Vita inflation is common. According to a 2001 survey of 2.6 million job applicants, 44% of resumes contained some lies and exaggerations (Kluger, 2002). Clearly, many people make their accomplishments look better on paper than they really are. For example, an applicant may claim primary responsibility for revising a department’s curriculum when in actuality he or she served on a revision committee but rarely came to meetings and contributed little. Plan questions carefully because there is a right and wrong way to verify information. If you tell references what was on the candidate’s vita and ask if this is correct, they are more likely to corroborate the information. Instead, say you know their department revised the curriculum and ask what role the candidate played. Ask open-ended questions and do not provide the answer for the interviewee.

Finally, prepare a simple closing for the interview. If needed, ask for contact information for anyone identified as a possible reference and offer a sincere thanks for the time and helpful information.

**Contact references to arrange for interviews.** Email references, introduce yourself and your task, request their assistance, specify the time required for the interview (usually 20 minutes), and offer several possible appointment times. Ask that they let you know which time is convenient or have them offer other options. This planning saves time (no phone tag), and the references are less likely to be interrupted and more likely to take the time to thoroughly answer questions.
On rare occasions, a reference may refuse the request. If so, ask if institutional policy prohibits giving references. If the refusal is not based on policy, contact others at the same institution.

**Conduct the reference checks.** At the appointed time, make your telephone call and follow your interview guide. Give ample time for the responder to talk, and avoid interrupting. Listen carefully to answers and ask frequent follow-up questions. Pay attention to what is said and how it is said as well as to what is not said. Be prepared with short phrases like, “Tell me more about that,” “How did others react,” or simply, “Hmm.” It is also crucial to be flexible. An interview guide is important, but it is only a guide. If the reference provides information on the candidate’s work behavior that you think is important, pursue the information. If a reference begins to discuss illegal information such as age or marital status, politely interrupt and say, “Excuse me, but it is important that I focus only on job-related characteristics.” Then rephrase your question.

By following these guidelines you can acquire valuable information for making well-informed decisions. The best predictor of candidates’ future behavior is past behavior. The best way to obtain a clear picture of past behavior is to interview people who have worked closely with the applicants. This process takes time, skill, and organization, but the effort can help you select the right person for your department.

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**REFERENCE**