RESEARCH BRIEF #2: BIAS IN FACULTY HIRING

By Dawn Culpepper and KerryAnn O’Meara

Overview of Issue

While most faculty members are committed to fair and inclusive search processes, hiring decisions, like any social process, are inevitably limited by unintentional biases and blindspots (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013; Kahneman, 2011). In this brief, we summarize research on how bias can influence the faculty search process and some of the strategies faculty search committees can engage in to mitigate it.

Main Findings

Research shows the language used in job ads and the composition of faculty search committees can influence the recruitment of women and underrepresented minority faculty members. For example, studies show job ads that include traditionally masculine-typed words such as “dominant” or “competitive” can reduce the number of women applicants (Born & Taris, 2010; Gaucher et al., 2011; Horvath & Szcesny, 2016), while other studies show organizations that signal a commitment to diversity through the ad language or institutional websites can garner more job interest from underrepresented candidates (Avery et al., 2013; Avery & McKay, 2006; McKay & Avery, 2006; Smith et al., 2004; Tuitt et al., 2007). There is some evidence that having a search committee composed of diverse members shapes hiring outcomes (Gasman et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2004); however, similar or better outcomes have been found when committees engage in training to become allies of diversity-related goals (Fine et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2015).

Studies suggest search committees are often prone to bias when evaluating candidate CVs and other application materials, such as letters of recommendation. For example, studies found the content and quality of letters of recommendation for academic positions varies significantly based on the gender of the applicant: letters written for women are shorter, contained more doubt-raisers, are less likely to describe the candidate’s research, and more likely to describe the candidate’s personal characteristics (Dutt et al., 2016; Madera et al., 2009; Schmader et al., 2007; Trix & Psenka, 2003). Other studies reveal when faculty evaluators are given the CVs or resumes of men and women candidates with identical qualifications, they are more likely to choose men candidates for faculty jobs (Steinpreiss et al., 1999) and lab manager positions (Moss-Rascusin et al., 2012), and faculty members are more likely to respond to emails from potential doctoral students who have White and male-sounding names when approached about mentoring and research opportunities (Milkman et al., 2015).

Given many of the biases exhibited for male and White candidates are unconscious, how can search committees change course? Research shows women and minorities are evaluated more fairly when search committees agree upon the evaluation criteria prior to reviewing candidate applications (Phelan et al., 2008; Uhlmann & Cohen, 2005), engage in structured interview processes (Brecher et al., 2006; McCarthy et al., 2010), and use evaluation rubrics (Dovidio, 2001; Isaac et al., 2009). Several studies show having more than one woman or underrepresented minority on the candidate short-list can increase the likelihood of diversity in hiring outcomes beyond the mere probability by reducing tokenism and out-group difference (Bilimoria & Buch, 2010; Heilman, 1980; Johnson et al., 2016; Van Ommeren et al., 2005). Several institutions, including many in the Big 10 Academic Alliance, engage search committees in workshops to become more aware of biases and develop efficacy in implementing strategies to mitigate it (Devine et al., 2017; Fine...
et al., 2014; LaVaque-Manty & Stewart, 2008; Sheridan et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2015; Stewart et al., 2004).

Key Recent Studies


In this case study, researchers analyzed the video-recordings of academic job talks (N=119) in five engineering departments at two universities. They found women job candidates received more follow-up questions and more questions overall when compared to men candidates, including when controlling for years of post-PhD experience. On average, they found the audience took up 1.3 times the amount of time during women’s talks compared to men’s and noted women were often rushed at the end of their talks, at precisely the time they were discussing their plans for future directions of their research. In addition, the researchers found the prevalence of audience interruptions varied based on departmental context, noting departments with a larger number of women faculty members asked fewer questions to all candidates and took up less job talk time than departments with fewer women faculty members. The authors suggest faculty hiring committees should use facilitators to manage audience questions during job talks.


In this paper, the researcher studied the process by which faculty hiring committees searched for and evaluated candidates for junior faculty positions using qualitative case study methods. The study was conducted at one prestigious, private research institution in a metropolitan area. The researcher observed the meetings of three search committees in three disciplines (humanities, social sciences, and natural science). The author found that in the initial stages of candidate evaluation, search committees rarely engaged in an explicit discussion of the hiring criteria, instead relying upon holistic evaluations of the candidate based on their own personal definitions of merit and quality. For the “fly-out” round, search committees considered the relationship status of women candidates and frequently did not advance women with partners, citing concerns about their mobility, whereas similar considerations were not made for men candidates. The paper indicates women, and particularly women with partners, face bias in the hiring process and search committees unevenly apply criteria to candidates during faculty searches.

Equity Minded Strategies

- Craft broadly defined job ads that list relatively few required qualifications and allow search committees to cast a wide net.
- Develop the criterion that will be used to evaluate candidates well before assessing candidates; Use a rubric to apply the criterion to each candidate; Encourage search committees to justify evaluation decisions using evidence from the applicant’s provided materials.
- Ensure equity in the on-campus interview process by appointing a facilitator for campus job talks and reducing the number of unscripted conversations between the candidate and members of the department; Ask department members for specific feedback on candidates rather than general impressions.
- Engage search committees in discussion about implicit bias and specific strategies they can use to reduce its presence in the search process.
References


