



## Mitigating Epistemic Exclusion in Faculty Hiring

Substantial research shows that epistemic matters, or the ways that certain kinds of research/scholarly knowledge are valued and legitimized, shape how faculty members are recruited and hired. This brief discusses how epistemic exclusion can manifest faculty hiring and offers evidence-based strategies for epistemic inclusion for faculty search committees and hiring units.

### UNDERSTANDING EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION

Epistemic exclusion refers to the ways in which certain methodologies, topics, assumptions, and kinds of scholarly knowledge, as well as knowledge producers themselves, are systematically devalued and delegitimized in the academy.<sup>1</sup> It occurs when formal institutional evaluation systems combine with individual biases to devalue certain kinds of scholarship and deem those who conduct it as illegitimate scholars. Examples of epistemic exclusion may include 1) devaluing research/scholarship focused on equity issues or issues of marginalization, such as race, ethnicity, gender, and queer studies; 2) questioning the work of individuals who use methods considered less typical in their field or discipline; 3) emphasizing traditional markers of productivity or narrowly recognizing research/scholarship published in a few, prestigious journals or outlets.<sup>2</sup>

Studies show that women and faculty of color are more likely to encounter epistemic exclusion.<sup>3</sup> For example, examining data from a survey of 1,341 tenure-track faculty at a research-intensive university, researchers found that women and Black, Latinx and Indigenous faculty were more likely to report that their research interests and opinions about research were not valued by colleagues, and that they needed to work hard to be perceived as legitimate scholars.<sup>4</sup> Epistemic exclusion therefore contributes to the persistent lack of diversity among faculty and limits the overall production and circulation of quality knowledge in academia.<sup>5</sup>

Epistemic exclusion can emerge during faculty hiring in many ways.<sup>6</sup> First, departments may exhibit epistemic exclusion if they signal narrowly defined research fields, approaches, or methodologies as preferred in faculty job advertisements. Second, search committee members may exhibit epistemic preferences when evaluating a candidate's scholarship. For instance, committees may view scholars who do work outside of the mainstream as "risky" and filter them from the candidate pool.<sup>7</sup> Third, if search committees are not diverse, only representing narrow epistemic views, they may not be able to accurately assess the scholarly potential of candidates with epistemic preferences different from their own.<sup>8</sup> As a result, epistemic exclusion can hinder attempts at broadening the candidate application pool and fairly assessing candidate credentials.



## **STRATEGIES TO MITIGATE EPISTEMIC EXCLUSION IN HIRING**

### **1. Recognize the role of epistemic matters in overall diversity efforts.**

The prevalence of epistemic exclusion in hiring stems from broader disciplinary/field climates that tend to value some forms of knowledge over others. Search committees that want to increase diversity and inclusion in hiring must, therefore, initiate epistemic conversations long before the hiring process begins and work to ensure that evaluation policies and systems acknowledge, value and reward scholars who do excellent work in a broad number of ways.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the search committee should be able to recognize the intersection of implicit biases and epistemic exclusion in the hiring process, including by increasing awareness via training and deliberate departmental discussions.<sup>10</sup>

### **2. Use broad definitions of research/scholarship in job ads and invite opportunities for interdisciplinary and community-engaged scholars to note how their work would contribute to the department.**

Job descriptions should embrace diverse approaches to research/scholarship and should not discourage potential candidates by narrowly defining the research topics or scholarly approaches. Job descriptions can also explicitly signal that interdisciplinary, community-engaged, and innovative research/scholarly approaches are encouraged. Examples of job ad language that addresses epistemic inclusion are:

- 1) Specifically identify research streams related to inequality and inequity.<sup>11</sup>  
Example: "We seek a scholar working on issues of racial and gender inequality, the economics of immigration, health inequality, policy evaluation, and closely related topics to research and teaching on topics central to race, ethnicity, gender/sex and disparities in modern society."<sup>12</sup>
- 2) Clearly note how interdisciplinary scholarship and research are valued in the department.<sup>13</sup>  
Example: "X is home to an interdisciplinary academic environment with a strong track record of collaborative and innovative research. The successful applicant must be able to positively interact within a collaborative community of scholars across campus."<sup>14</sup>
- 3) Deliberately highlight commitment to social impact and public engagement.  
Example: "Our students, faculty, staff, and community partners are driven by a passion to break barriers that keep individuals, families, communities, and populations from attaining optimum health and wellness. The successful candidate will contribute to fulfilling this vision."<sup>15</sup>

### **3. Include search committee members from different subfields/sub-disciplines or related disciplines/fields.**

When search committee members lack the expertise to understand the research/scholarship of candidates with different epistemic perspectives, they are more likely to rely on their bias.<sup>16</sup> As



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such, search committees should include faculty members from various subfields or subdisciplines and/or consider an outside member.<sup>17</sup> It is recommended that the search committee consist of members with varied demographic identities/profiles and from different sub-disciplines.<sup>18</sup> Search committees may also consider appointing co-chairs, inviting external reviewers, and including staff or student representatives.<sup>19</sup>

#### **4. Operationalize research/scholarly excellence using broad and diverse indicators of productivity and impact.**

Impact factors and citation rates are limited indicators of the quality of a candidate's work, and often serve a mechanism for epistemic exclusion. Search committees should therefore broadly define the metrics that they will use to assess candidates' research/scholarly productivity and impact, to include traditional markers such as peer-reviewed journals and grants, as well as metrics like press and media coverage, downloads of scholarly materials or datasets, views on scholarly blogs, legal citations, and other indicators that show impact the work academic and non-academic audiences.<sup>20</sup> Evaluation rubrics can also nudge search committees toward more expansive definitions of research/scholarly excellence by providing multiple examples of productivity and impact, and by encouraging search committee members to note the factors that influenced their candidate rating (e.g., I reviewed two white papers, a peer-review journal article, and a scholarly blog post).<sup>21</sup>

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