Faculty Hiring: One New Campus Approach

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Abstract

Hiring tenure-track faculty is an activity common to all colleges and universities. Most institutions engage in hiring activities each year. Despite the number of searches conducted annually, most available information about faculty hiring consists of guidelines for conducting searches and statistics about searches within disciplines. The purpose of this essay is to briefly examine an alternative approach to hiring tenure-track faculty that has been used at California State University Channel Islands.

Faculty Hiring

This essay grew from experience at a campus that utilizes a nontraditional hiring process for all of its tenure-track hires. At California State University (CSU) Channel Islands, the hiring process was designed with the concepts of interdisciplinarity and collaboration in mind. It is important to note that CSU Channel Islands is a new campus that opened in 2002. The campus has used a number of processes, including hiring, to focus attention on its institutional mission. After several years of observing this process, I began to look for examples of institutions where the less traditional search processes were employed to provide some comparison to experiences on the Channel Islands campus. I found that examples of campus-wide experimentation are very limited. Comparative information on the effectiveness of different search processes is almost nonexistent. This essay offers a glimpse at one approach that differs from the traditional departmentally based searches common to most institutions.

It is useful to begin with a quick overview of tenure track hiring by colleges and universities. Thousands of tenure track faculty searches are conducted every year. The wide range of national publications, journals and professional publications, and online sites filled with position announcements offer evidence of the number and type of search efforts underway at any given time. These efforts produce tens of thousands of applicants for institutions seeking to fill new or vacant positions. Depending on how success is defined, many of these searches will be considered successful. They will be deemed a success either because a hire is made or because, in the long term, the candidate is retained as a tenured faculty member and valued colleague at the hiring institution. The process of recruiting faculty requires significant time and money and, when successful, causes institutions to make substantial long-term investments in faculty whose work will have an impact on the future of the hiring department and institution. The recruiting, selecting, and hiring of tenure-track faculty is one of the most important series of decisions made on each campus.

The typical departmental search follows a predictable pattern. Internal approval to hire is followed by formation of a departmental search committee. The position is advertised in national and/or professional publications and online listings. After a review of applications, the committee may conduct initial interviews at professional association meetings or phone interviews. When the pool has been narrowed, a handful of candidates are invited to campus for interviews. Following a departmental recommendation, the dean, provost, or president (depending on the institution) makes a final decision about offers of employment. Despite the routine pattern followed, it is not unusual for those entering the recruitment process (particularly for the first time) to be unclear about the norms and expectations of the recruitment experience.

Plenty of materials describe particular aspects of the faculty recruitment process. These include policies and procedures produced at the system, institutional, school, or departmental level that articulate the objectives of the hiring process. They often specify preferred approaches to the hiring process and offer direction on how to comply with various legal or policy mandates. Many books and articles are published with "how-to" advice for departments, search committees, and institutions seeking to run successful searches (Clark and Ma 2005; Vicker and Royer 2006). Additional literature offers guidance to institutions seeking to increase and foster faculty diversity (Smith et al. 2004).

Other views of the recruitment process are available from a number of narrative descriptions offered by search participants (applicants, committee members, and chairs). Some disciplines have an array of descriptive information, including advice on how to prepare for interviews and other aspects of the job search process. Much of this material is based on first-person narratives about candidate experiences. Commentaries about searches frequently appear in publications such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Occasionally authors explore broader issues, such as the use of the hiring process to advance objectives such as institutional mission (Van der Vorm 2001).

In addition to anecdotal reports, there are multiple sources of data about searches. Individual institutions, multicampus systems, and professional associations all collect data about searches and hires. Despite the availability of some data, comparative study and detailed analysis of faculty recruitment processes is limited. Given the enormous investment required to undertake this process and the long-term impact that it has on an institution, additional detailed study and analysis would aid in providing a better picture of this critical process.

In the last decade, higher education experienced changes in the technology used for recruiting and hiring, changes in both the composition and expectations of the academic work force, and changes in institutional expectations of faculty. During this same period, the processes used to select faculty, in most cases, do not appear to have experienced significant change. On many campuses, searches continue to be conducted using processes modeled on past practice, with only incremental change. While these remain an effective mechanism to fill thousands of academic positions every year, it

may be useful to look at searches from the perspective of a new campus where these familiar processes have been modified to meet specific institutional goals.

A New Campus Experience

The design and execution of recruitment processes on many campuses are influenced by the experience of search committee members and previous institutional practice. New institutions or new units have an advantage (and disadvantage) of being free from some of the past practices that tend to drive many institutional processes. CSU Channel Islands is one such new institution. CSU Channel Islands opened to its initial class of students in August 2002 with the distinction of being the first new university to open in the twenty-first century.

As with many new institutions, the founding administrators wanted to be innovative in the development of this campus. They tried to create an academic program and culture that would distinguish it from the twenty-two other institutions in the California State University system. Given limited resources within the CSU system, they recognized that the faculty (particularly those hired in the early years) would be few in number and would be asked to take on significant responsibilities associated with institution-building in addition to traditional faculty roles of teaching, scholarship, and service. These initial faculty would, at least temporarily, need to forgo some of the scholarly activities that characterized their earlier academic careers in place of collaborative planning activities required to open new academic programs on a fixed timeline.

During the early campus development and planning efforts, founding administrators looked for ways to foster collegiality and cooperation in the new institution. Both the planning and founding presidents embraced iterations of a mission statement focused on interdisciplinarity, community engagement, multicultural understanding, and international perspectives, which became the central elements of the campus mission. The faculty recruitment process was expected to further the development of these mission elements.

An important footnote in the development of CSU Channel Islands is that, before opening as a freestanding institution in 2002, its campus was host to a branch campus of CSU Northridge. Seeking to draw on the experience of other branch campuses going through similar transitions, campus planners looked to the University of Washington. Before the opening of CSU Channel Islands, the two branch campuses of the University of Washington (at Tacoma and Bothel) underwent a similar transition. Planners visited Tacoma and adapted elements of the process used to hire initial faculty members at the two new campuses in Washington. Since there were no faculty tenured at the two campuses, at the University of Washington the initial recruitment process utilized faculty from the Seattle campus on search committees. This process diverged from traditional searches in that applicants were advised they could be placed at either campus if selected and the culmination of the selection process included a collective applicant "campus" interview process. Instead of each disciplinary search bringing its candidates at different times to "campus" for interviews and other

activities, candidates from each search were brought together at the same time in one location. This second approach was integrated into the initial selection process utilized at Channel Islands (and has been continued with modifications in subsequent recruitment cycles).

CSU Channel Islands integrated activities utilized in Washington with processes required by the CSU system. It is important to note that, in addition to being the largest public university system in the country, CSU is also the largest unionized system in the country. The collective bargaining agreement between the CSU and the California Faculty Association contains language pertaining to the selection and appointment of tenure-track faculty.

The recruitment process that developed at Channel Islands shares many elements in common with processes that might be observed on other campuses. However, this process is intended to focus on the four elements of the institutional mission (with particular emphasis on interdisciplinarity) in addition to typical disciplinary criteria. As a result, it includes variations that influence both its focus and outcomes.

The differences are apparent from the start of the process, when review committees are convened for each approved search. While individual searches are initiated on a discipline-based position description, they are part of a campus-based process. The review committee normally has a majority of members from the discipline, but the committee must include faculty representatives from outside the discipline. The position descriptions (and advertisements) feature both the requirements of the position and the institution's mission statement. When candidates apply through the online system the display of position announcements in this system presents information about the institution's mission before displaying the discipline-specific details of each individual position announcement. The online system itself is used only for screening minimum qualifications, receiving application information, and receiving supplementary materials from applicants.

Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the campus search process, there are no interviews at professional meetings as part of the review process. Once review committees complete an initial review to narrow the pool of applications, they conduct phone interviews in order to recommend three candidates for campus interviews for each position. The recommendations are forwarded to a larger faculty campus search coordinating committee.

Once invited to campus, the candidate experience at Channel Islands differs from most other institutions. Instead of being invited to an individual departmental interview and campus visit, the finalists in the Channel Islands process receive an invitation to the campus interview process. Following the opening of the campus, this process has included candidates from an average of more than twenty searches annually. The roughly sixty candidates invited to campus were arranged in groups of fifteen to twenty across the various disciplines being recruited, but could include multiple candidates from the same discipline, depending on the number of searches. Whenever

possible, visits from candidates in the same discipline are distributed among the three or four times established for campus visits (Wakelee and Cordeiro 2006).

When the groups of candidates arrive, they are housed at a hotel near the campus. The evening before most activities, candidates meet with campus faculty and administrators at a reception held at the hotel. Because the on-campus activities for candidate groups take place over a two-day period, normally in one building complex, the event resembles a small conference with multiple concurrent sessions. The first morning begins with an opening session that normally includes welcoming remarks, some information about the campus, explanations of the schedule of activities, and a reminder of the importance of interacting with as many faculty and staff (including those outside of their discipline) as possible. Each candidate is provided with a detailed schedule of the multiple activities and sessions he or she is scheduled to attend or participate in during the day. Although there are a variety of activities, much of a candidate's time on campus is spent engaged in traditional activities, including interviews with the review committee, dean, provost, and president. Candidates also make presentations of research or offer a demonstration of their teaching. Much like a conference, both the candidates (presenters) and members of the campus community move from one venue to another throughout the day. Throughout their visit, candidates take part in meals, receptions, tours, and structured group activities with other candidates and campus faculty. The formal and informal activities offer candidates an opportunity to observe elements of the campus culture.

During their visit, candidates are encouraged to interact with faculty and other campus community members who may not be part of their review committee. Even though they may not be serving on a review committee, all tenure-track faculty members are encouraged to participate in the campus visit process. For faculty members, even those not on a search committee, the process is time consuming, normally including three two-day sessions over a three- or four-week period. Another aspect of faculty hiring at Channel Islands that influenced faculty hiring was the level of administrative involvement in the process. In addition to interviewing with the dean, each candidate invited to the campus also had interviews with the provost and president. The president took a very active role in both the candidate visits and the decisions about offers of employment. According to campus data, between 2006 and 2008 approximately 42 percent of candidates recommended by hiring committees were extended offers of employment (CSU Channel Islands Faculty Affairs office, unpublished data).

Following each campus visit, feedback is solicited from all campus participants in the event. At the conclusion of all campus visits, each review committee submits its recommendations to the campus search coordinating committee. After considering committee recommendations along with feedback from other faculty and members of the campus community, the coordinating committee makes hiring recommendations to the dean and provost.

Although it has undergone several modifications since 2001, the general process used

by the campus has been utilized in each of the campus hiring processes since the campus opened. A total of ninety tenure-track faculty members were hired following these campus-based searches. Although the campus did not conduct tenure track recruitments in 2004 and 2008, in other years applicant pools for positions at Channel Islands were significantly larger than the system average, while the "success" rate of searches was below the average of tenure track searches across the state university system. The campus anticipates using its interdisciplinary campus-wide search process for future tenure track recruitments.

Discussion

The recruitment process used at Channel Islands has been successful in some ways and less so in others. A review of the institution's first several years suggests that a strong group of faculty was selected and the campus was able to achieve its initial academic goals. At the same time, the process resulted in fewer hires than anticipated and, as the campus began rapid growth, questions emerged about whether this approach would be sustainable when used on a larger scale. The experience at Channel Islands suggests that, despite its successes, this approach may not offer a practical model for many institutions.

It appears the hiring process at Channel Islands has been quite successful based on several subjective measures. Those hired have proved to be a cohesive and collegial faculty during the critical startup period for a new institution. During this period, the campus built its initial academic programs, experienced rapid enrollment growth, and received high compliments from its regional accrediting agency while receiving initial accreditation in the shortest possible time. As this faculty engaged in institution-building activities, taught courses as part of the 4-4 load specified by the CSU contract, and maintained an impressive level of scholarly activity, they also created an array of interdisciplinary programs, interdisciplinary General Education courses, and a number of signature interdisciplinary course offerings. As a result of these efforts, CSU Channel Islands is becoming known as a "destination" campus within the CSU system.

One of the challenges faced by the faculty at CSU Channel Islands is that they have proceeded with the work of building a new campus with fewer tenure-track colleagues than anticipated. During its short history, the "success" rate in the search process was lower than other institutions in CSU. Between 2001 and 2007 searches across the CSU system resulted in hires approximately 70 percent of the time, while only about 50 percent of searches at Channel Islands resulted in hires during that period (California State University 2009). Searches at Channel Islands produced large applicant pools, often the largest per search in CSU, while consistently resulting in the lowest "success" rate in the system. One explanation for this may have been guidance from campus administrators not to "settle" for candidates who did not appear to be a good fit for the campus. The lower success rate may also suggest a greater level of selectivity in the hiring process. The significant involvement of the president and provost appears to have increased the selectivity (and lowered the "success" rates) in hiring. Another explanation is tied to the calendar of this campus-wide search process. Because the searches for positions in each discipline culminated with common on-

campus visits, some academic disciplines found that the campus visits were taking place after other institutions had already begun making offers to candidates in their discipline. The common scheduling placed certain disciplines at a disadvantage because they were not in a position to begin making offers until what may have been late in the process, compared to other institutions.

While there is a concern about lower "success rates" in total number of hires per search, it is also useful to consider longer term measures of success. It is important to note that startup institutions present faculty members with many challenges and pressures not common in a typical academic career. Between 2001 and 2009, there were more than ninety tenure-track hires at Channel Islands; during that period only eight of those returned to their prior campus or left to accept positions at other institutions (CSU Channel Islands Faculty Affairs office, unpublished data). Given the added pressures and workload inherent in a startup environment, the retention of more than 90 percent of hires over the institution's initial eight-year history is significant and suggests that, while it may not produce the desired number of hires, this process may have resulted in a high level of "fit" among hires at Channel Islands. What is not clear is how much of the "fit" is the result of the process, and how much may be attributable to a salary differential (Channel Islands initial salaries were higher than other CSU campuses) and other material benefits (such as on-campus housing) offered by the campus in excess of those available at some sister institutions.

Another aspect of the question about "fit" is tied to the emphasis on institutional mission that is an important feature of the search process at Channel Islands. For faculty at the campus, the organization of the search process offers an opportunity to reexamine aspects of the campus culture. Anecdotal evidence from conversations with faculty (i.e., former candidates) suggests that the search process, and the opportunity it offers to observe the campus culture, is highly effective at communicating the centrality of the campus mission and signaling institutional values. It is not clear whether the strong emphasis on mission causes some candidates to self-select out of the process.

Perhaps the greatest challenge to this faculty recruitment process is the success and growth of the campus itself. Since the culmination of the process is a common campus visit rather than a department-based interview process, it becomes more difficult to maintain the same level of participation and engagement of existing faculty in the search process as the campus and faculty grow in size. While coordinating schedules and maintaining a high level of faculty participation were reasonable tasks when the faculty was thirty or even sixty members, as the faculty continued to grow they became an issue. Although recent state budget shortfalls have temporarily halted tenure-track hires on the campus, when enrollment growth resumes finding ways to make the process sustainable on a larger scale will be a significant challenge.

Because of issues of scalability, a campus-based process, like the one utilized at Channel Islands, would be difficult to implement in a setting where there are a large number of searches or a large number of faculty who would be expected to participate.

At many institutions, the campus culture might not lend itself to this type of approach. The conflict between existing workload and schedules of faculty would likely be an obstacle to the use of a recruitment process of this type on almost any campus.

Despite its limitations, there may other instances where an approach such as the one described here may have applications in some other settings. As seen at CSU Channel Islands and the University of Washington, the creation of new departments, colleges, or institutions and the intention to foster interdisciplinary collaboration offer opportunities to experiment with different selection processes. Although it is not an approach that has wide application on most campuses, the faculty recruitment model at CSU Channel Islands offers a different lens through which to consider an alternate way to structure this very familiar process.

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