

Diversity Liaison Issues and Strategies to Consider

By agreeing to serve as the Diversity Liaison you play an important role in ensuring attention to diversity-related questions at every point during the search process and working toward the goals articulated in the University of Puget Sound Diversity Strategic Plan.

<http://www.pugetsound.edu/about/diversity-at-puget-sound/diversity-strategic-plan/goals/>

Reflections of a 2012 Diversity Liaison

“At the most basic level, diversity as a factor in hiring was a much more constant presence in our search because we had a diversity liaison in all search conversations. Though diversity has long been an interest in our department, it has often been the same voices encouraging the department to consider diversity as a factor in hiring. With the official liaison role, I was able to speak not only on behalf of my own interest in diversifying the faculty, or even on behalf of that general interest in our department, but also on behalf of the university and its educational mission. This meant that throughout the search I was able to voice the arguments in favor of considering diversity as a valued element of candidates’ possible contributions to the campus with significantly more authority. The liaison role gave this voice a new kind of meaning.”

Below is an outline of the goals of hiring a diverse applicant pool as articulated in the Diversity Strategic Plan, a summary of best practices, and suggestions from Puget Sound faculty members about how to ensure attention to diversity related questions at each point in the hiring process.,

Goal 1: We will increase the recruitment and retention of students, staff, and faculty from underrepresented minority groups.

Underrepresented minority: Racial or ethnic groups that have been historically minoritized and/or are typically underrepresented in American higher education including people of Black/African-American, Latin/Hispanic, and Native American heritage.

Goal 2: We will create a campus environment that fully welcomes and supports social diversity.

Social diversity: Characteristics that could cause groups or individuals to be minoritized and/or systematically excluded from full participation in higher education, including age, disability, gender, race/ethnicity, religion/spiritual tradition, sexual orientation, job status or socioeconomic class, personal appearance, and political beliefs.

Campus Resources

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Diversifying the Faculty: A Guidebook for Search Committees (2002)
Washington, D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities
by Caroline Sotello Viernes Turner

This Guidebook is recommended reading for search chairs and diversity liaisons. The report recommends taking a proactive approach at each step of the search process and being aware of institutional, departmental, and personal biases.

“Search Committees often approach their charges in a passive, routine way: advertise the position in publications (e.g., *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Black Issues in Higher Education*, *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*), evaluate resumes, invite three to five candidates for campus interviews, and then make an offer. To redress the current underrepresentation of faculty of color, however, search committees must take a more proactive approach and genuinely *search* for candidates of color” (p. 13).

“Five myths hinder the hiring process: good minority faculty go to the best universities; espousing Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) doctrine is enough; to hire minorities standards must be lowered; minorities will not go to predominately white institutions; and minorities prefer the private sector. These myths are difficult to dispel because they are often invoked to veil deeply held beliefs of ethnic or gender inferiority. These beliefs produce a type of negative mindset that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This negative mindset assumes that the institution and department are completely rational and unbiased in their decision-making and that cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender biases are simply nonexistent. As a consequence, when these assumptions of neutrality underlie screening and evaluation process, there is grave danger that minority and female candidates will be rejected. Such rejection is often attributed to the candidate’s lack of qualification or interest, rather than to the prejudice that is present and that influences the process” (p. 16).

This perspective is echoed in the reflections of a Puget Sound faculty member,

“We too often assume that job searches are by their nature objective merit-based exercises based solely on academic credentials. The subjective aspects are too often invisible even to those exercising the judgments. Hiring a diversity of candidates is a priority, but not the highest priority. I think the department would say that finding the best applicant to fit departmental needs would be the highest priority. The department would also say that they try to find such applicants without excluding any individual or group based on age, disability, gender, race/ethnicity, religion/spiritual tradition, sexual orientation, job status or socioeconomic class, personal appearance, and political beliefs, but that the department also does not attempt to target or recruit particular individuals or groups during the application process.”

Attending to Diversity–Related Questions at Each Step in the Search Process

Discussing the Role of the Diversity Liaison

“Is the role of the diversity liaison to consistently remind the search committee about the importance of diversity and the campus strategic goals or is it to advocate for candidates whose applications might be viewed more favorably in light of the diversity they brought to the department.”

“We had a probing conversation at the beginning of our review of the applications about what valuing diversity would mean in our context, including looking at actual personal heritage of candidates and research into multicultural theatre practice and dramatic literature by candidates whose personal heritage does not align with the type of theatre they write about.”

“I think the prevalent attitude at the beginning of the search was one of passive openness to diversity: the explicit goal was to get the "best" candidate (perhaps without a rigorous discussion of how that term might be contextualized.) Now, in the death throes of our search, diversity has become an active theme, as some disagreement has materialized as to who the best candidate might be. Diversity was probably initially conceived as playing itself out along the traditional lines of race, gender, and sexual orientation. At this stage in the search, it has become clear that it extends to other axes, including our openness to people outside the conventional "culture" of the liberal arts, and our views on scholarly work that strays beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.”

Writing and Posting the Position Description

“We approached the alternative listings as a supplement to the standard processes—as a way to signal publicly our interest in attracting a diverse candidate pool. In other words, we expected that applicants who saw our ads in these additional resources would perceive our active commitment to diversity that extended beyond the boilerplate of the conventional job listing in our disciplinary venues.”

“We worked to proactively get the word out through personal contacts, colleagues on campus outside our department who work in related areas, and specialized professional groups and list serves.”

“Adding a question to the written application materials that specifically asks the candidate to address how he or she could contribute to making Puget Sound a more diverse campus might be the most straightforward manner to elicit information about ethnically diverse candidates, and might also prompt us to think broadly and creatively about what it means to have a diverse faculty.”

Initial Screening of Applicant Files

“We used to focus on ‘What do you know?’ and ‘What do you do?’ we’ve realized there is another core competency to professional success cultural consciousness.”

“In the very first stage of the search process the diversity liaison served as an additional “check and balance” in our decisions regarding which candidates to exclude based on the assessment

that they were clearly unqualified for the position. Whereas we typically have three faculty members within the department do the initial culling of applicant files, the diversity liaison served as a fourth member of this screening committee. In an attempt to retain as many potentially qualified diverse candidates as possible, we implemented the following policy: in order to exclude a candidate from the pool, three out of the four of the screening committee members needed to vote in favor of exclusion—unless the applicant was a clearly identifiable minority candidate, in which a unanimous vote of all four screening members to exclude was required.”

“The diversity liaison was assigned the role of reviewing decisions and flagging applications that had not made the first cut, but that might merit further review on the basis of some strong contribution to diversity. Search committee members were instructed to make brief comments about every candidate they rejected, and to pass borderline cases to the liaison for explicit review.”

Interviewing

“As a department we discussed what it means to have a diverse faculty. Rather than try to resolve this issue ourselves, we obtained a list of questions that were considered legally appropriate to ask candidates. The department reviewed this list and decided to ask a single similar question during phone interviews of all of the candidates on our short list. These answers were considered in deciding which applicants to invite to campus.”

Sample Interview Questions

- Provide the University of Puget Sound mission statement. How has your experience and background prepared you to be effective in this environment with this diversity value/initiative?
- What do you see as the most challenging aspect of a diverse working environment? What steps have you taken to meet this challenge?
- Tell us about a time you had to alter your work style to meet a diversity need or challenge?
- How have you handled a situation when a colleague was not accepting of others’ diversity?
- What does it mean to have a commitment to diversity? How would you develop and apply your commitment at the University of Puget Sound?
- What was/is the diversity value at your current/former employer? What impact did you make on this value?
- What efforts have you made, or been involved with, to foster diversity competence and understanding?

- What type of efforts have you initiated or led to foster diversity competence and understanding?
- What have you done to further your knowledge about diversity? Have you included diversity in your professional development? How have you demonstrated what you've learned?
- What kind of leadership efforts would you make to ensure a commitment to the University of Puget Sound's diversity value/initiative?
- What strategies have you used to address diversity challenges? What were the positives and negatives?

Campus Visits

“We made additional efforts to reach out across the campus to colleagues in a range of fields that would provide extra-disciplinary homes during campus visits, as well as to community groups.”

Reflecting on the Role of the Diversity Liaison

“Now that the search is complete, I recognize that while we were not able to diversify our faculty with this search in terms of the identity of our new hire, we were able to make a substantial contribution to the diversity of the university's curriculum. My focus, then, has shifted to ensuring that we do all we can as a department to support our new colleague as he/she develops this new curriculum.”

Discuss the diversity liaison role and reflect on the process and outcome. Consider, the questions,

--What did the department do differently in the search because of having someone assigned to the diversity liaison role?

--How does the outcome contribute to the diversity of the department and the campus community?

--What resources and strategies do we want to bring forward in our next search?