

The Chronicle of Higher Education

Chronicle Careers

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Friday, May 25, 2007

Don't Just Search, Recruit

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HEADS UPAdvice for
academic
administrators

A prominent athletics director once told me the secret to a successful college sports program: "What separates the consistent winners from all the rest is tenacious recruiting. A faithful alumni base and state-of-the-art equipment and facilities are all wonderful, but recruiting good people is the single most essential ingredient."

That is equally true of building a first-rate academic department. You may have shiny new facilities and cutting-edge technology, but nothing will bring a program to new levels of excellence faster and more effectively than attracting and retaining first-rate people. That is why searches for both professors and administrators are among the most consequential tasks we perform.

But savvy professionals in college athletics seem to understand what many of us on the academic side often do not -- that "searching" and "recruiting" are not always the same thing.

Search committees sometimes assume they can simply place a job advertisement and sit back and wait to see which applicants emerge. It is almost as if we believe that actively pursuing candidates in the manner common to the business and sports worlds will somehow sully the rarified halls of academe.

Such passivity merely ensures mediocrity. If we are to build outstanding departments and colleges, we need to take a page from the athletics playbook and aggressively pursue the best and the brightest. Effective recruitment takes many forms and will depend on the context, but it begins with a search committee that has a clear understanding of its role in the process.

The committee's first objective is to entice top candidates to apply. That means selling the institution and the job as desirable, and it means undertaking a lot more work than some committee members may be prepared for, especially if their attitude is, "Well, if people really want the position, they will apply."

Committees aren't going to attract superior candidates by advertising in only one or two places. You might supplement your usual ads with notices in other, more specialized disciplinary forums and with announcements posted on electronic forums in the discipline.

For positions above entry-level, especially administrative ones, the committee might send personal letters inviting people to apply or to nominate others. That can be a costly enterprise because it usually entails purchasing a membership list from a disciplinary organization and incurring a hefty postage expense. Nevertheless, it is one of the most effective methods of developing a pool of good candidates, especially if the letters sent by your committee are written by someone the recipient knows personally or by reputation. Needless to say, those letters will be most effective if they appear to be genuine appeals and not form letters.

Ambitious committees should also arrange to make personal calls to a select number of potential candidates.

A personal touch is particularly helpful in searches for senior faculty members and administrators.

Another option is to dispatch committee members or colleagues, armed with recruitment materials, to disciplinary conferences. Your ambassadors can disseminate information about the search and meet informally with interested parties to answer questions about the available position and the institution.

Publicizing the position in so many venues may seem redundant, but doing so ensures that the greatest number of people have the potential to see the announcement. Besides, some people may need more than one encounter with a job notice before entertaining the idea that the position might be a good fit for them. Seeing announcements in multiple forums may well convince them that the institution is serious about casting as wide a net as possible.

If the goal is to sell the position and institution to potential applicants, a Web site devoted to the search is a must.

Effective sites will contain more than a position statement and a list of committee members. The objective here is to make the site useful for the candidate, not the committee. The search site should contain links to sites that will best promote the institution and the community, so the key question to ask in constructing a site is, "If I were a first-time visitor to the institution, what information would help me understand what I might be getting into were I to accept a position here?" The search site can be an important recruitment tool, so it is wise to spend time planning and building it.

The search process is a supremely rhetorical situation. It entails determining your audience's needs and desires and devising a strategy to address them. As with any rhetorical occasion, it is important to put yourself in the place of the audience -- the candidate. If it is true that the job search is a kind of courtship, then "recruiting" means wooing. Certainly, we all like to be courted, to feel wanted, so the objective of effective recruiting is to determine how to make each candidate feel desired.

I can't count the number of times I have witnessed a search destroyed because a committee member (or in some cases an entire committee) chose to transform the search from a courtship into an inquisition. You may derive a great deal of personal satisfaction from pummeling a candidate with a barrage of "tough" questions but that is a sure way to drive off an applicant. Also inappropriate is airing the department's dirty laundry during a campus visit.

Such behavior is self-destructive and unprofessional -- and it happens all the time.

A courtship implies that both parties are looking one another over in an attempt to imagine what a long-term relationship might be like. A candidate who is given the red-carpet treatment during a campus visit is likely to develop positive feelings about the search process and the institution itself. Candidates who are badly treated will feel resentment even before an offer is tendered.

In one search I am familiar with, the organizers failed to arrange for individuals to escort candidates from one meeting to the next, and one candidate was even instructed to take the subway from her hotel to the university, even though she was unfamiliar with the city. (As luck would have it, she narrowly avoided being mugged on that ill-fated subway ride, and subsequently, had no hesitation in turning down a generous offer.)

And recruitment does not end once the finalists have visited the campus. Too often, a search committee will do a superb job up to that point and then drop the ball. It's like permitting the opposing team to rush in at the last minute and win the game even though you have been ahead from the beginning.

A provost I know once allowed a stellar dean candidate to slip through her fingers simply because she failed

to understand that his original tepidly negative response to her offer was not his final word but was meant to be the first in what should have been a back-and-forth exchange. Instead, she politely thanked him for his interest in the institution and wished him well.

A skillful negotiator might have turned things around at that crucial point in the process. Rarely is an initial offer perfect -- details will need to be ironed out, responsibilities clarified, understandings forged. What at first seemed unworkable might, in the end, have been salvageable.

When I extend an offer and the candidate responds, "I'm not quite sure this is a good fit," you can be certain that my first reply will not be, "Well, at least we tried." The response should be, "What can we do to make this work for you? Is there something creative we can do to make the position more acceptable?" Often, the accommodation a candidate needs is not costly or unreasonable but simply involves rethinking the details.

Over the years, I have hired several outstanding administrators who had turned down my original offer. Because I saw my task as "recruiting" the best possible individual, I was determined to do everything within reason to land the top choice. I was not about to take "no" lightly. If the goal truly is to build a great institution, then persistence, determination, and perseverance are not optional.

Search committees need not adopt all of these measures in every search, but the general principle remains the same: If building a first-rate academic unit is like developing a successful athletics program, then the search process is our one opportunity to assemble the ideal team. That means recognizing that passive searching isn't enough.

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