



DON'T CTRL+F FOR DIVERSITY:

Articulating EDI Qualifications in Faculty Recruitment

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INTRODUCTION

As larger trends in Higher Education have shown, recruitment of minority faculty has failed to match the desired institutional outcomes as stated in strategic plans or job postings. Previous research has demonstrated how academic institutions can unintentionally reproduce white supremacy and prevent the hiring of minority faculty, for example by hiring committees' focus on "cultural fit" or the unconscious bias of committee members. Academic libraries are no exception to these trends. For years, our profession has included demonstrated experience working in and fostering diverse environments as a required qualification for faculty recruitments. Like many organizations, VCUL Libraries (VCUL) took a look at institutional practices around the concepts of equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) principles and how those principles were applied in recruitment, promotion, and retention. For several years, VCU has a requirement that the following statement be included as a required qualification in all faculty position advertisements: "Demonstrated experience working in and fostering a diverse faculty, staff, and student environment, or commitment to do so as a faculty member at VCU." However, there has not been clear guidance or a shared understanding of how to evaluate candidates on this qualification. Search committees within VCUL often struggled to know how to assess this requirement when evaluating candidates. More clearly articulated EDI qualifications and criteria in recruitment must be discussed in order to evaluate candidates on their experience and commitment to EDI ideals and help institutions realize their stated commitments to inclusive environments.

Despite having only two required qualifications for faculty positions at VCUL, a Master's degree and a demonstrated commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion, candidates were making it to the on-campus interview stage without the EDI requirement being clearly articulated in their candidate materials. Many employees found themselves, in more than one search, literally performing a CTRL + F for the words "diversity" "equity" "inclusion" and other related words and their variants in candidate materials. (In the personal computer world, CTRL F is used as a keyboard shortcut that allows a user to search for a word, phrase, or character within a web page or document.) While no candidates bury their Master's degree in their materials, and most will explicitly address preferred qualifications, this second required qualification was not being treated with the

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same level of importance. This paper will outline the steps taken to clarify university instructions and provide better guidance to library search committees.

INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is a public university located in Richmond, Virginia and classified as “Very High Research Activity” according to the Carnegie Classification. VCU has approximately 29,500 students and a workforce of approximately 6500 full time employees. VCU has two campuses in the United States: the Monroe Park campus, which primarily serves undergraduates and their classes, and the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) campus, where the five health sciences schools and the medical center are located. There is also a School of the Arts campus in Doha, Qatar.¹ VCU Libraries (VCUL) is comprised of two libraries, the James Branch Cabell Library on the Monroe Park campus, and the Health Sciences Library on the MCV campus. VCUL has approximately 6700 full-time and part-time employees. Within VCUL, librarians all have faculty status; the Faculty Organization (Fac Org) is the governance body for librarians.

During the creation of the Libraries’ strategic framework in 2020, staff debated whether or not to include EDI as a separate value, or to have it woven in with other strategic values. Library employees overwhelmingly voted to have EDI woven into all aspects of the strategic plan, rather than treated as an isolated value. Likewise, those that recruit should not treat diversity requirements as a box to check, but as an integral part of the job requirements.

In 2020, the Office of the Provost mandated that all faculty job searches require candidates to submit a “Statement of Contributions to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion providing your career aspirations and contributions toward promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion.”² This requirement added to confusion about candidate evaluation. Search committee members were confused about how to evaluate the response to this question, and how candidates would be evaluated on their statements.

In April 2020, Fac Org decided to create an “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion and Faculty Recruitment Task Force” (EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF) as a way to assess current faculty recruitment practices and ensure search committees are consistent in their candidate review practices. The task force charge states:

The Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Faculty Recruitment Task Force will investigate and prepare a report and recommendations on ways that VCU Libraries can evaluate faculty candidates on their experience and commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive environment, including the implementation of a Diversity Statement in candidate materials, per the VCU Office of Faculty Recruitment’s newly proposed requirements. The task force will also make broad recommendations in regards to onboarding, retention and promotion of diverse faculty and for work related to EDI, and ensuring a diverse pool of faculty applicants. For the purposes of this task force, recruitment is defined as beginning from the writing of the job description through contract signing of the successful applicant and notification of other applicants of the search result. The task force will be defining “diversity” according to VCU’s non-discrimination statement.

The EDI and Faculty Recruitment Task Force started the research phase by looking to get a sense of how these issues are being addressed at other institutions as well as other VCU units, and gathering practical and scholarly work done in this area. Based on preliminary work, the group divided the faculty hiring process into six stages or issues: diversity statements provided by candidates in their candidate materials; diversity statements on university or library websites provided by the institution; job ads and candidate pool (how the job ads and descriptions are created and where they are shared); candidate CVs and how they and the candidates are assessed; and interviews and the candidate experience. Each member of the task force was assigned an issue and began individual research with plans to have individual summary reports completed before starting the next step.

While the EDI and Faculty Recruitment Task Force was charged by Faculty Org to look at certain questions that are specific to the current faculty hiring process and to help implement new directives from VCU, the group

recognized and expected that much of our findings would be broadly applicable to all recruitment and hiring, and also recognized the impact of faculty hiring decisions on all staff in the libraries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The discussion of diversity and inclusion within librarianship is not a new discussion. EDI has many concerns, but we have purposefully confined our literature review to recruitment, per the Task Force's charge. Librarianship is not representative of the population it serves. In 2006, the American Library Association (ALA), released its study "Diversity Counts" that affirmed the need to recruit non-white people into the profession.³ That study revealed that the majority of the credentialed librarians (holders of ALA accredited Master of Library Science degrees) were predominantly white and female and of the ages 45-54. The study also noted that the number of non-white recipients of Master of Library Science degrees (MLS) had increased, from 1990 to 2000. The study was updated in 2012, and there was no significant increase in the numbers of non-white librarians.⁴

The literature provides numerous recommendations for practices in efforts to increase the recruitment of non-white librarians. Suggestions include using inclusive language, establishing consistent guidelines to evaluate all candidates, addressing the hiring pipeline⁵; avoiding the use of the subjective term "fit" in making interview and hiring decisions^{6,7} having minimal qualifications in posted job ads, and giving all candidates the same interview experience, educating search committees and staff about microaggressions;⁸ creating an inclusive campus climate, creating inclusive job postings, creating career track programs for librarians, offering financial incentives (such as student loan repayment programs, and funding for professional development opportunities) as a way of enticing non-white candidates;⁹ active recruitment strategies, as opposed to the traditional advertising methods of recruitment that are reliant on those that are already a member of the network and the cessation of relying on only those that have had an internship into the profession.¹⁰

An increasingly common tool for faculty recruitment is candidate diversity statements.¹¹ When utilizing diversity statements, institutions should be aware of issues caused by applicants self-disclosing their identities, both positive and negative. This includes how it may carry stigma or induce bias for readers, and how it may reconceptualize membership in previously stigmatized groups as an advantage.¹² Rubrics can be utilized as a template for search committees to evaluate diversity statements. University of California at Berkeley's Rubric for Assesses Candidate Contributions for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion" provides a framework for three areas of the diversity statement, including knowledge and understanding, demonstrated experience, and future plans.¹³ The EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF evaluated this rubric and found it to be the most comprehensive and effective template available for our organization to adapt and modify if needed. We were particularly impressed with the potential afforded to candidates to supplement their work experience with future plans. Hopefully use of this rubric will narrow the gap between newly graduated and/or minority applicants.

The impact of white supremacy and whiteness on recruitment and librarianship cannot be ignored. As Hathcock stated "[Whiteness] is a theoretical concept that can extend beyond the realities of racial privilege to a wide range of dominant ideologies based on gender identity, sexual orientation, class, and other categories.... it also stands as a marker for the privilege and power that acts to reinforce itself through hegemonic cultural practice that excludes all who are different."¹⁴ In our efforts to dismantle whiteness and create an environment where minority employees feel welcome, one should consider Balderrama's intention setting (2000) "We must be able to articulate why we in our profession would want someone distinct from us to work with us, not for us. To work alongside us, not beneath us. To create with us, not duplicate us. To reciprocate with us, not assimilate to us. To mentor us, not intimidate us. To be an equal, not a box in the organizational hierarchy. To be a colleague."¹⁵

SURVEY

The EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF partnered with the VCUL Inclusion and Diversity Committee to create an internal, anonymous survey for all VCUL employees to share their experiences and impressions of recruitment and hiring, particularly the faculty hiring process at VCUL.

We received 32 responses. Of the respondents, 75% were faculty, while 25% included a mix of classified staff, University and Academic Professionals, hourly employees, or “declined to say.” 81% of respondents said they had been on a search committee at VCU, while 20% said they have yet to serve on a VCU search committee. Less than 60% of respondents reported ever having, to their knowledge, taken any search committee-related training at VCU. Only 25% reported having taken the recently created internal training course focused on EDI issues in recruitment, “Search Committee Training: Creating a Successful, Diverse, and Inclusive Search Process at VCU.” 76% of respondents had not had any search committee training within the last year, with 40% of respondents saying they had not had any search committee-related training in over 2 years.

Results from the survey largely supported themes and findings from research, while also highlighting issues of particular concern at VCUL. There was an overwhelming sentiment that search committee training should be required prior to an individual serving on a search committee. It was also suggested that this training should require some kind of anti-bias and anti-racism component. Additionally, training should be periodic and not lapse for too long between serving on committees. Respondents strongly expressed the need for training about inappropriate questions and conduct toward candidates for all VCUL employees. It was suggested that there should be reminders about those expectations before every candidate visit. Respondents strongly expressed a need for a rubric and standards to be applied across searches, especially around the DEI requirements, in order to create a shared understanding internally and externally.

Transparency was a prevailing theme in the survey responses. This included a need for transparency about the purpose of the DEI statement within VCUL (i.e., confusion or fear about how it will affect recruitment, rather than focusing on efforts for inclusion), transparency about how the faculty hiring process works (who makes what decision, how decisions are made, how candidates are evaluated, the role of the search committee, etc.), and transparency about who is chosen for search committees. In support of this, clear and updated documentation for the recruitment and hiring process would be necessary.

A number of respondents expressed having had negative experiences during their on-campus interviews, specifically around antagonistic questions and the perceived lack of a welcoming environment. While we don't have information as to the questions these respondents were asked, the responses indicated that everyone who comes in contact with a candidate needs to know the type of questions to avoid. Our group did not feel these questions were asked in an attempt to circumvent the law, but an attempt to find some common bond in informal settings, such a candidate meal. This exposed the need to look more broadly and holistically at our culture here at VCUL around making candidates feel welcome and wanted. We need to ensure that all employees who come in contact with the candidate at any time are aware of the type of questions that should not be asked, even if the intent was viewed as “harmless.”

SUGGESTED ACTION ITEMS

The EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF's first concrete action items were aimed at addressing the climate we were creating for candidates when they arrived for their on-campus interviews, and to help employees involved in the interview process provide clear, focused feedback aimed at the job qualifications. To this end, we recommended that a statement of values be drafted that states our commitment to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment to faculty candidates and to include reminders about inappropriate questions. In March 2021, the VCUL Fac Org endorsed the adoption of a statement of values, which states:

VCU Libraries has conducted an extensive screening process thus far, and the candidate visit is an opportunity for candidates to get to know us and the work we do at VCU Libraries, as well as for us to get to know them. We hope that through these meetings, they can experience what a welcoming and inclusive workplace VCU Libraries is. During your time with the candidate, please avoid questions relating either directly or indirectly to age, race, national origin, gender, religion, sexual orientation, veteran's status, political affiliation, family (spouse, partner, children, etc.), or disability.

We also recommended we update our candidate evaluation form. Previously, it had just been a drop down with the options of “Strongly recommend,” “Recommend” and “Do not recommend” with an open text field for feedback. Based on our research, we proposed that the open feedback field be changed to a small number of more focused questions based on the job description qualifications and indicating the extent to which individuals interacted with the candidate. The goal with these changes to the form are to minimize vague feedback based on more “feel” or “fit”, which we know can lead to biased feedback, and to help employees focus on the actual qualifications of the candidates.

As of April 2021, The EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF has a number of items being advanced for discussion to VCUL Fac Org. These are items we feel there is enough evidence to support action, but more discussion may be needed around the specifics of implementation. We strongly encourage search training for all employees, which covers interview code of conduct, inappropriate questions, and creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for candidates. We believe this training should not lapse longer than a certain period of time, which is to be determined. We suggest more advanced training for employees serving on search committees, including bias awareness training. We believe this training should be required each time an individual serves on a search committee or should not lapse for longer than a year. Internal documentation concerning the hiring process must be updated and maintained as a reference tool for employees. All external documentation should also be updated and maintained for the candidate’s benefit. The EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF also suggests that VCUL involves members of VCU’s Recruitment Inclusive Champions (RIC) program as advisors to search committees. The RIC program was created in 2014 in order to “help strengthen VCU’s faculty and staff recruitment efforts by building cohorts of knowledgeable champions from units across the university who have completed a comprehensive learning experience...and help to support the search process to ensure that a robust, diverse set of qualified candidates are being considered” (Recruitment Inclusive Champion, 2021). As of 2021, VCUL has six employees who have participated in the RIC program. The EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF aims to meet with these participants in order to determine the feasibility of their participation in the search process in such a capacity.

Several of the task force findings were surprising and we hope the recommended actions can improve the recruitment experience of candidates and our employees. We understand that recruitment is the first step in the creation of an inclusive environment, and the other actions need to be taken in order to build an inclusive environment. As an organization, we have to continually review practices to ensure our actions are conducive to the environment we want to create.

CONCLUSION

Recruiting more minority faculty, particularly non-white faculty, into librarianship is an important part of creating a more diverse, inclusive and equitable profession, but recruitment is still only one small part of this goal. VCUL’s EDI and Faculty Recruitment TF focused on evaluating our current recruitment process to ensure that we are creating means and structures to meaningfully and fairly evaluate candidates and to ensure that the required qualification of a demonstrated commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion is given the proper importance. But the Task Force’s focus on recruitment is not an indication that improvements in this area will themselves improve the overall hiring and thriving of minority librarians at VCUL; rather, it is an acknowledgment of the scope and complexity of this particular issue alone. In order to ensure that our profession truly begins to represent the people it serves and the values it claims, minority faculty need to not only be hired at our institutions, but supported, valued, and given opportunities to grow and advance. It is our hope that this work does not end with termination of the Task Force’s charge in June, but that meaningful action be taken on our recruitment recommendations, and additional and equally in-depth work be done to examine the retention and promotion of minority library faculty in the profession and at VCU.

NOTES

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