

The Impact of COVID-19 on Faculty Recruitment

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is radically altering the landscape of higher education, a notoriously change-adverse institution. Within the professoriate, COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting individuals from historically marginalized populations, including women, black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC); lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (or questioning), and other (LGBTQ+) people; and people with disabilities (Myers et al., 2020; NASEM, 2021; Skinner et al., 2021; Malish et al., 2020; APM, 2021; Lebrasseur et al., 2021). Literature is documenting the disruptions of the pandemic and positing solutions, some more helpful than others, to the challenges faced by faculty already in the ranks (Misra, 2021; Reese et al., 2021; Oleschuk, 2020; South-Paul et al., 2021; Kreeger et al., 2020; Gray and Brooks, 2021). COVID-19's impact on faculty recruitment, however, especially as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, remains underexplored. In order for higher education to successfully recover from the pandemic, it is imperative that we view the crisis as an opportunity to (re)devote our attention, resources, and actions to recruiting and retaining a diverse and inclusive faculty.

This paper aims to energize conversations about COVID-19's impact on faculty recruitment by (1) surveying the status quo of faculty recruitment prior to the pandemic; (2) examining the pandemic's differential impact on the recruitment process and talent pool, specifically on populations historically marginalized in academia; and (3) exploring how we can build upon extant equity-focused recruitment approaches to address the pandemic's effects on faculty recruitment. This discussion invites institutions to (re)commit to inclusive faculty recruitment through the development and implementation of intersectional and equity-focused approaches that attract, retain, and advance a professoriate that is reflective of the rich diversity and talent in our nation.

THE STATUS QUO OF FACULTY RECRUITMENT BEFORE COVID-19

The civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in the measurable increase of individuals from historically marginalized groups in academia (Taylor et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, the representation of these groups is still declining along the pathway to the professoriate compared with their representation within the U.S. population (Zambrana, 2018). This underrepresentation is most pronounced in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) professoriate (NCSES, 2017d). Indeed, women, who comprise 50.8 percent of the U.S. population, account for only 31.8 percent of STEM faculty, while underrepresented minorities (URM), who constitute 33 percent of the U.S. population, make up only 10 percent of the STEM faculty (NCSES, 2017a; AAUP, 2020), and, of the 13 percent of individuals with a disability, only 1 percent are STEM faculty (NCSES, 2017b, 2017c). To date, although it is estimated that 5.3 percent of individuals in the United States identify as LGBTQ+, data is unavailable for the number of STEM faculty who identify as such (Jones, 2021). To fully understand underrepresentation in the professoriate, it is paramount that we use a critical diversity lens to consider the intersectional identities, the historical conditions that have produced this marginalization, and further disaggregate this data within the specific contexts of academia that are in question (e.g., field, discipline, rank, intersectional identities) (Herring and Henderson, 2012).

In the late 1990s, a series of national reports highlighted the persistent underrepresentation of women and individuals from ethnically and racially minoritized groups in STEM (NAS, NAE, IOM, 2007a, 2007b; MIT, 1999). Faced with the reports' irrefutable evidence, combined with internal and external pressures, institutions began taking actions to recruit more faculty from historically marginalized groups in STEM and elsewhere. Some of these actions included the formation of diversity taskforces, revisions to institutional mission/vision statements, climate studies, diversity-focused speaker series, family-friendly policies, dual-career hiring offices, mandatory implicit bias trainings for search committees, faculty recruitment toolkits, and the adoption of target-of-opportunity hiring programs. These efforts, often in the form of documents and policies, while well-intentioned, are only initial endeavors. If institutional efforts begin and end with these approaches, "diversity becomes punctuation" (Ahmed, 2012). These approaches, if implemented as stand-alone-initiatives, can obscure the root and neglected causes of underrepresentation, namely inhospitable climates, tokenism, isolation, service burdens, bias in hiring, epistemic marginalization, funding/salary disparities, and work/life policies that result from the historically white, male, and

heteronormative foundations of academia (Settles et al., 2020; Griffin, 2020; Hanasono, 2019; Zambrana, 2018; Ponjuan, 2010; Billimoria and Stewart, 2009; Valian, 1999; Brown, 2021a).

PRE-PANDEMIC PROMISING FACULTY RECRUITMENT APPROACHES

In the past 20 years, some institutions, many of whom have participated in the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE Program (ADVANCE, n.d.), have developed relevant and replicable recruitment approaches that move us into the territory of institutional transformation. Such institutions are enacting change, by dismantling and reformulating the status quo policies, practices, and procedures of the faculty search process that reproduce inequality. This reworking of the faculty search life cycle involves setting actionable expectations for inclusive searches in the form of diversity hiring recruitment plans, offering peer education, funding pathways to the professoriate and cluster hiring initiatives, and implementing mechanisms for assessment and accountability. These approaches are briefly discussed below.

Diversity Hiring Recruitment Plans

Namandjé Bumpus, director of the Department of Pharmacology and Molecular Sciences at the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, contends, "We must approach creating an anti-racist culture with the same vigour we apply to every other dimension of scientific excellence" (Bumpus, 2020). Applied to faculty recruitment, this vigor includes developing diversity hiring recruitment plans that encourage search committees to document their specific methodology for designing and conducting a search that operationalizes DEI principles. Upon completion, these plans are then submitted to the dean and/or the provost's office, or other designee (e.g., chief diversity officer) for review, feedback, and approval. Although plan contents vary across institutions, most include a discussion of some or all of the other following search elements:

- Review of the state of DEI in the field of search
- Search timeline

- Justification of search committee composition and member roles
- Active recruitment strategy to attract a diverse applicant pool
- Draft of job advertisement
- Initial strategy for how the committee will develop evaluation criteria and an application review process that minimizes and addresses implicit biases
- Initial strategy for an inclusive interviewing and selection process

Numerous resources highlight strategies that search committees can implement to create and execute a diverse, equitable, and inclusive faculty search (Griffin et al., 2020; Stewart and Valian, 2018; EAB, 2017; Fine and Handelsman, 2017; Bilimoria and Buch, 2010; Sensoy and Diangelo, 2017; Kazmi et al., 2021).

Providing Peer Education

In order for systemic change to occur in the faculty recruitment process, diversity hiring plan documents will not be enough. Institutions should provide education to their faculty on issues related to DEI in the faculty hiring process. Mandatory implicit-bias trainings for search committees are one institutional tool; however, these workshops are most effective when combined with other interventions and not as a stand-alone solution (Dobbin and Kavlev, 2018). Furthermore, while these formal trainings raise participants' knowledge about the impact of implicit bias on faculty recruitment, they may not have gained tangible tools that they can implement in their search process to reduce its impact. In 2001, the University of Michigan's ADVANCE Program created the Strategies and Tactics to Recruit to Improve Diversity and Excellence (STRIDE) Committee (Stewart et al., 2004; STRIDE U-M, n.d.). Their peer education model has since been adapted and replicated at numerous institutions (STRIDE UMBC, n.d.; Reed, 2018; STRIDE Northeastern, n.d.; STRIDE Texas A&M, n.d.; STRIDE UMass Amherst, n.d.; Equity Advisors, n.d.). STRIDE committees, and their variations, are composed of highly respected faculty with a demonstrated commitment to DEI, and not necessarily research expertise in these areas. These committee members provide peer education and support for search committees on how to design and execute diverse and inclusive searches.

Using the best practices for equitable faculty searches cited above, combined with the context-specific needs of the search at hand, these peer educators facilitate conversations with a search committee about how to diversify their recruitment approaches to attract a diverse applicant pool, help a committee create an inclusive job ad, assist with developing fair evaluation criteria, formulate and systemize an inclusive interview process, or create an inclusive faculty onboarding process. The power of this approach lies in the nonhierarchical conversational peer education structure, in which members are not charged with setting search policy or approval, merely guidance (Brown, S. 2021b). Moreover, the work of STRIDE committees signals that all members of the institution, from the president, provost, deans, and departments chairs to the rank-and-file faculty, regardless of background or research focus, must be committed to and actively work to promote DEI.

Funding Pathways to the Professoriate and Cluster Hiring Initiatives

Postdoctoral Fellowships

In recent years, numerous institutions, including the University of California System, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), have developed postdoctoral fellowship programs that are designed to support fellows committed to diversity and inclusion in higher education and to prepare them for careers in academia through individualized mentoring around research, teaching, and professional development opportunities (Culpepper et al., forthcoming; Roach, 2009; EAB, 2017; Abrams, 2008). Some of these programs include a conversion process, whereby at the end of the fellowship period the postdoctoral fellow is hired by the host department as an assistant professor. The postdoctoral fellowship model is frequently open to applicants from all fields represented at the host institution. A typical application includes a cover letter, CV, research and/or teaching statement, a statement of commitment to diversity and inclusion in higher education, and reference letters. Successful programs, such as the Postdoctoral Fellowship for Faculty Diversity and the College of Natural and Mathematical Sciences Pre-professoriate Fellowship Program at UMBC, have hosted a combined 24 fellows,

and of those who have completed their fellowships, 20 are in faculty positions, 14 of whom are currently tenure-track faculty at UMBC (UMBC, n.d.(a), (b)). The UMBC fellowship model, overseen by an executive committee of tenured faculty of color who work with deans and departments in a multistage review process, includes an assessment of department readiness as one of the primary evaluation criteria.

Cluster Hiring

Cluster hiring involves the simultaneous hiring of multiple positions that might be across various fields, departments, and colleges and are often connected to interdisciplinary topics or a grand societal challenge such as health disparities. An explicit goal of cluster hiring is to intentionally foster research collaboration among the hires. Although diversity and inclusion were not the initial goal of cluster hiring programs when they first began (Urban Universities for HEALTH, 2015), they are now key tenets of such searches because the broad design of a cluster search tends to produce more diverse talent pools (Freeman, 2021). Furthermore, a search focus in a particular area or areas is a way for institutions to powerfully signal the valuing of research areas that may suffer from epistemic marginalization. The expectations for collaborations among the new hires within a cluster helps to address the issues of isolation and tokenism that frequently arise in single-hire and/or target-of-opportunity programs. In 2020, the National Institutes of Health launched the Faculty Institutional Recruitment for Sustainable Transformation (FIRST) Program, which provides grant funding to institutions to support the hiring of diverse faculty committed to inclusion and supporting underrepresented scholars in the biomedical fields (Mervis, 2020). It is anticipated that the outcomes from this initiative will add to the scholarly literature on cluster hiring.

Assessment and Accountability

The most successful of these promising faculty recruitment approaches include evidence-based mechanisms for accountability and outcome assessment. Having documents, policies, and

programs do not suffice; we must be able to demonstrate if these approaches are working, and, if not, change course. Here, data analytics software, such as Interfolio Faculty Search are useful tools for measuring DEI outcomes in faculty searches (Interfolio n.d.). Employing these technologies empowers institutions to make real-time decisions by monitoring the diversity of the applicant pool at various points along the life cycle of a search. This type of data assessment permits search committees to be held accountable for executing the actions outlined in their diversity hiring and recruitment plans, which were discussed earlier. If, for example, the initial applicant pool does not reflect the diversity of the talent pool, which can be ascertained from the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates (NSF, n.d.) or from other data collected by field-specific professional societies, the search committee or dean could decide to extend the application deadline and revamp recruiting efforts. Similarly, in later stages of search, a homogenous finalist list generated from an applicant pool that was initially diverse might be cause to pause the search and review the process to ensure that biases did not impact the evaluation process. In short, we can use the diversity hiring recruitment plan to determine whether a committee followed the protocols they agreed to at the outset of the search or not. As such, employing the data can empower search committees to avoid a "check-the-box" mindset by becoming critically self-reflexive of the actual operationalization of their recruitment strategies. Furthermore, institutions have a duty to disaggregate the data and examine it from multiple angles, both recent and longitudinal, to understand trends and adapt their recruitment approaches accordingly. Together, these approaches help ensure that our recruitment interventions are having the desired outcome. Merely having institutional commitments or presenting faculty recruitment diversity data in the institutional aggregate can serve to mask inequality and thereby stymie our efforts.

Accountability and assessment are also necessary components of postdoctoral fellowships to the professoriate and cluster hiring programs. Institutions should not only assess the progress of the individual participants but also the program itself. For example, at UMBC, the Executive Committee reviews the Faculty Development Plans detailing the fellows' research, teaching, and professional development activities at the beginning of each semester and an End-of-Semester Report at the semester's close. The Executive Committee uses information from these reports to track the progress of each fellow and intervene if and when necessary. Relatedly, cluster hiring programs should track the tenure and retention data of faculty hires and/or follow

the scholarly and external funding outputs of the collaborations, which is perhaps the most important indicator of success.

To elaborate on the relationship between recruitment and retention, we must acknowledge that our DEI efforts do not end once a candidate accepts the job offer. On the contrary, acceptance is merely the beginning of an institution's longstanding commitment to each new faculty member's success. As such, departments should incorporate practices that actively reflect this commitment. For example, in the area of onboarding new faculty, some institutions have implemented launch committees, which are strategically comprised mentoring teams for the new faculty member (Stewart, 2021). A launch committee often includes the department chair, a senior faculty member in the department with shared research interests, a faculty colleague external to the department with shared research interests, and a colleague who oversees the committee and its activities. This model directly challenges the issues of isolation and epistemic exclusion that many new hires from underrepresented groups face in academia. Beyond the home institution, the Eminent Scholar Mentoring model is another means for launching a new faculty member's career. Here, new faculty are paired with a prominent external researcher in their field with the aim of launching the new faculty member within their broader scientific and research community (UMBC, n.d.(c)). Finally, the same attention and value placed on imbedding DEI into the recruitment process should carry over into the promotion and tenure process. Indeed, implicit biases likewise creep into the development of promotion and tenure criteria and the actual evaluation and review process (Russell et al., 2019). Furthermore, the emphasis placed on a candidate's commitment to DEI in higher education should also be a criterion for promotion and tenure. For example, the Awareness of Decisions in Evaluating Promotion and Tenure (ADEPT) program at Georgia Tech has developed a series of online modules to educate the promotion and tenure committee on how implicit bias impacts faculty decision-making (Georgia Tech, n.d.). Likewise, many STRIDE teams are now providing peer education to promotion and tenure committees.

THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON HISTORICALLY MARGINALIZED FACULTY

Faculty recruitment, however, does not occur in a vacuum. Whether we recognize it or not, our historical, political, economic, and social climates, both national and global, have always been intractably linked to the climate(s) within higher education. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has magnified the structural and systemic inequities within higher education and the faculty recruitment process, is no exception. COVID-19 is occurring alongside the Black Lives Matter movement; the Me-Too Movement; rising anti-Semitism; anti-Asian discrimination; LGBTQ+ rights; the ongoing refugee crisis at the U.S. Southern Border, in the Mediterranean, and in Afghanistan; public discourse on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA); the border wall; climate change; and the recession. The addition of the COVID-19 pandemic, and its disproportionate impact on women and historically marginalized groups, is aggravating these long-festered wounds. Prior to COVID-19, many institutions found themselves in the uncomfortable, but necessary, spotlight because of their dormitories named after Confederate soldiers, buildings constructed using slave labor, questionable responses to on-campus sexual assaults, and the pervasive underrepresentation of historically marginalized faculty. In the wake of protests and pressures from students, staff, and faculty alike, we witnessed a plethora of institutions hiring chief diversity officers, founding new diversity offices, conducting climate surveys, hiring trainers, convening diversity task forces, creating/revising policies and mission statements, developing land acknowledgment statements, and setting aside pools of money for target-of-opportunity hiring and other diversity recruitment hiring goals (Kyaw, 2021; McKenzie, 2020). As mentioned earlier, these reactionary approaches are only initial steps; we must engage in the ongoing deep, proactive, and transformative work or risk falling into the reactionary trap of institutional performativity.

We know from the literature (see Introduction) that COVID-19 is wreaking havoc on the lives of women and underrepresented minorities, revealing the extent of the nation's lack of social safety nets and systemic inequities. Because of longstanding health disparities, underrepresented minorities are more likely to be severely affected by the disease itself. Due to the United States' lack of family-friendly policies, childcare, and eldercare infrastructure, the closure of schools, daycares, and other care facilities have left many, women in particular, with the task of balancing work and home. This task was already untenable, if not impossible, for many academic women prior to the pandemic, given invisible labor and service burdens both at home and work (Tower and Dilks, 2015; Eagan Jr. and Garvey, 2015; Guarino and Borden,

2017) that were already impossible pre-pandemic. For faculty within these marginalized groups, the COVID-19 pandemic has further affected their research, teaching, and external funding output, the key indicators of career success. Adjuncts and lecturers, who are disproportionately drawn from historically marginalized groups, were likewise already in a precarious labor position prior to the pandemic. Many have found themselves unemployed due to institutional budget cuts and without health insurance (Krebs, 2020). The already excessive mentoring and teaching expectations placed upon women and URM faculty has led to burnout due to addressing the needs of the student population, which is likewise suffering (O’Meara, 2020). In addition to the above-mentioned challenges, our faculty talent pool of postdoctoral fellows and graduate students from underrepresented groups may be unable to finish research and publications due to lab closures, present at conferences, and network, which places them at a greater disadvantage to compete for faculty positions (Stockard et al., 2021). Moreover, there will be fewer faculty positions, even in the wake of a wave of faculty retirements, due to budget cuts related to COVID-19 (Woolston, 2021) and those that are looming as we approach the 2025 enrollment cliff (Adam, 2020). Given the global nature of the COVID-19 crisis, it is imperative that faculty diversity recruitment initiatives do not become an afterthought or worse, a casualty in the ensuing panic.

(RE)COMMITTING OUR EFFORTS: LESSONS LEARNED AND OPPORTUNITIES POST-PANDEMIC

Rather than succumbing to complacency or framing DEI as a “want rather than need” (Goodwin and Mitchnek, 2020) that can quietly be placed on the backburner, we should “view the pandemic as an opportunity to course correct from the pre-pandemic status quo (Boss et al., 2021; Kirk-Jenkins and Hughey, 2021). Our efforts must continue the work of dismantling the status quo of faculty recruitment, but we must adapt our approaches to respond to the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic. We must intentionally embed diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice as the guiding principles of our recruitment and retention approaches.

As an initial start, we can interrogate the promising practices reviewed earlier in this paper and identify opportunities for their adaptation to address COVID-19–related disparities

that may emerge in the process. Now is the time to do more, not less, even if it requires doing more with less.

In light of budget cuts, institutions should start or continue to fund postdoctoral fellowship programs and cluster hiring initiatives. At the same time, these programs will not be successful unless there is a peer education and departmental readiness component. Institutions should ensure that search committees are incorporating a discussion of how they will mitigate the impact of COVID-19 disparities upon applicants in their recruitment, evaluation, and interview strategies. Institutions must not only state their expectations and commitments, but also provide supports through peer education to enable committees to take results-oriented actions. For example, might it be possible to implement a COVID-19 impact statement for applicants as is currently being done for promotion and tenure review? Job advertisements might discuss an institution's recognition of the impacts of COVID-19 on applicants and request an impact statement as part of the application materials. In tandem, search committees should, more than ever, given the paucity of faculty openings, employ broad language to attract a diverse pool of applicants. Or, to expand and make their recruitment efforts more accessible, search committees might consider hosting an online and recorded webinar to recruit for the position, rather than relying solely on conferences, which may be costly and time prohibitive for many to attend.

In the area of application review, peer education committees might help search committees become sensitized to how COVID-19 might have caused a gap in an applicant's CV or a deceleration of their publication, teaching productivity, and grant funding. Indeed, many faculty are already attuned to these impacts on their own professional/personal lives, but we must ensure that they are likewise considering the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the talent pool. At the interview stage, search committees should provide information to the candidate about how the institution is supporting faculty whose research and teaching have been affected by COVID-19. Additionally, search committees should be aware of the challenges that many candidates may face due to family obligations in traveling to interviews and provide more flexibility in scheduling. Finally, once hired, the onboarding and mentoring plan should consider the individualized needs and circumstances of the hire in order to be successful.

In sum, throughout every step of the process, search committees should be asking themselves how a practice does or does not foster DEI and adapt accordingly. In our actions, we must be mindful and self-reflexive to ensure we are not unwittingly reproducing inequality. For

instance, to avoid further burdening historically marginalized faculty, who are stretched even thinner by the pandemic, institutional leadership from the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top must not only commit to accountability but actively hold our peers and ourselves accountable (Brown, 2021c).

Understandably, given the ongoing instability, it is difficult to know where to begin to address the impact of COVID-19 on faculty recruitment. Notwithstanding the uncertainty, higher education has always had a societal duty of care to act to foster DEI within the faculty. The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder of this responsibility, not an exception. Moreover, each institutional response will be unique to its own history, context, and needs. While institutions should be learning from one another about successful models and approaches, such as those mentioned in this paper, this is not a one-size-fits-all exercise—we should adapt, assess, and adjust based on institutional-specific needs. We should also not view any one program or approach as a stand-alone solution, but develop a multilayered, multileveled, and multifaceted approach. It is essential that our DEI practices extend beyond faculty recruitment to guarantee that we are retaining and advance these faculty, or else all of our efforts will be for naught. Given the impact of COVID-19 on higher education and all of its stakeholders, it is critical that institutions (re)commit to DEI in the faculty recruitment process, particularly given the little progress we have made pre-COVID-19. Commitments alone, however, will not translate into meaningful change. Institutions must respond to this invitation to collectively act, assess, adapt, and continuously hold themselves accountable.

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