Using Criteria to Assess Candidates

Criteria—fair, unbiased, well-developed—are the cornerstone of good search processes. Criteria need to be developed at the start of the search and used to guide decision-making at each stage.

Once committees start reviewing candidates, criteria are the measuring sticks. However, in dialogue, discussion can sway away from the criteria, with a significant and negative impact on fairness. If committees do not rely on criteria, their evaluations and recommendations can be swayed by conflict of interest and conscious and unconscious biases. The result is evaluations that don't align with the committee's expressed intentions; that differ from legally outlined criteria in the job advertisement; that over-value the qualifications of some candidates and undervalue others; that prevent us from hiring the best candidate.

To avoid this outcome, consider key principles for use of criteria:

- Develop the criteria at the start of the search
- As a group, consider all your assumptions about what the criteria mean (what is high quality research? What are examples of meaningful collegiality? How do you know someone is a good teacher?) to develop a clear description of each, and examples of the evidence you will look for
- Make sure the committee understands and agrees on the criteria
- Use these criteria to create your assessments so that you have evidence to know if the candidates meet the criteria. Consider any elements you may want to know about the candidates so that you can build these into your criteria and assessments, and thus have evidence to support selection
- Create the job posting and assessments, including interview questions, at the start of the process
- Review the criteria and be clear on them before reviewing candidates
- Create and use templates based on the criteria for taking notes on and assessing candidates
- In discussing candidates, focus on the criteria rather than speculation or personality
- If the committee has agreed that all research areas are equal, commit to not preferring candidates because of their research areas
- If more than one candidates published in the same or comparable journals, commit to considering this publication as equivalently valuable across all candidates (and similarly for comparable journals, post-docs, types of work, etc.)
- Consider multiple factors which may affect mobility of candidates—why they may not have moved across institutions or internationally for different degrees or post-doctoral positions; attended more elite institutions; etc. Reasons can include family

responsibilities (extended family, parent care, childcare); having young children; finances; health considerations; and more. Because these circumstances often fall more heavily on some groups than others, it is important not to hold these circumstances against candidates to avoid discrimination or bias, as well as missing a strong candidate.

- Don't rely solely on impact factor or number of publications to assess research excellence. Community-based research takes longer to develop contacts; may have fewer outputs; takes longer to publish; and is less likely to be published in high impact journals. Make sure that you consider quality of research design, thinking, assessing information, and the social impact of research independently.
- Don't throw away criteria because someone stands out to you at the current stage of the search. They may stand out because of the "recency effect" (if you just saw their work and it has stuck with you) or "affinity bias" (we prefer people who are more similar to ourselves) or "confirmation bias" (their identity matches the dominant group in society, and so your brain thinks they match this role and only sees evidence to support this image of them as successful). Take your time to consider the evidence from each candidate from each stage in the process thus far in formulating an assessment.

Sample search committee dialogue

Review the following sample search committee dialogue. Consider: What are good practices? What are problematic? What ought they to do differently?

Chair: Let's jump into the discussion. Who are your favourite candidates?

Bill: I like Smith. He's gone to the best schools. And his research area really is the most important one in the discipline.

Carole: Let's not worry about his pedigree. Let's focus in on his research. I agree his area is interesting. But is it really the most important area?

Ashraf: If we look at the criteria, we can see that we have weighted all research areas equivalently. So we can't prefer this candidate just because we like his research area.

Bill: But I just have a feeling about Smith. He ticks all my boxes. Unlike Valentina—I don't recognize her institution.

Chair: And her research area is edgy. I'm not sure she'll fit in with the bulk of what we're doing here. And will she be able to get any grants? Not likely!

Juliana: My favourite is actually Mikelson. He's the best because of his impact factor. It's the highest for any of the applicants. And with research the most important thing, I think he should be our top pick on the shortlist.

Ashraf: Can we look at the different types of research across the candidates first? I'd like to make sure we have a fair basis for comparison.

Chair: Well, sure. Mikelson published in *Snooty and Elite*. It's the top journal in our discipline. And then he also has lots of publications in *Middle of the Road but Respectable*. That adds up to a top candidate in my opinion.

Carole: Well, Valentina had a number of articles in *Middle of the Road but Respectable* as well. And then she also published in *Cutting Edge Research Just Gaining Respectability*. And her work is in an emerging area that crosses disciplines. I think it's quite exciting and cutting edge.

Chair: Well, I don't think that compares. Not sure how Valentina got into *Middle of the Road*; must have pulled some connections. Regardless, we know that Mikelson's publications in there prove his abilities.

Bill: Who cares about the criteria? We should use our critical judgments. I just know that Smith is the best. If you don't include him at the top of the list, I won't be able to trust your judgment on any other candidates.

Ashraf: If we compare the breadth of their research, it seems that Valentina covers the fullest spectrum, and Smith has quite a narrow focus. Let's see what we said we were looking for in the criteria.

Chair: Well, I have another problem with Valentina. The others have done some work overseas with their post-docs, but she's just stuck around the same area. How can we believe she really is excellent if she hasn't worked internationally? I think it's a big red flag.

Bill: Yes, and she got her last two degrees at the same institution. I think it's suspicious … who knows how she got admission to the program? Maybe they just felt sorry for her.

Carole: I believe, from her personal statement, that she mentions she has a child … she took mat leave, which is why she had the work slow-down, and for family support needed to stay in the same geographic area.

Bill: Well, there you go! She hasn't been able to do quality research because she has a child. And if she has another one? That will be the end of her research career. Pass for me!

Chair: I mean, in terms of research strength, we should just look at the numbers. Smith has the most publications: Bam! He's the winner.

Ashraf: Yes, he does have more, but the Valentina's work is community based. We know it takes more time to develop contacts, conduct the work, and reach findings. Plus, she has done a lot of community outreach in sharing what she's learned, not just journal publications.

Bill: But none of that counts, does it? We're looking for excellence and academic work. Why bother reporting back to the community? Just wastes time that should be spent on high impact writing.

Chair: I think we've had enough discussion. Let's pick our favourite candidate. Mine is Mikelson. Does everyone agree?

Ashraf: Could we look at the other criteria as well? There is teaching, community engagement and communication skills too.

Carole: And we haven't even talked about a couple other candidates—Li and Patel.

Chair: I don't think we need to—clearly, we each raised our favourite candidates. And research is really what matters, so we'll use that to make our decision. So, who votes with me for Mikelson?

Sample Dialogue: What are best practices? What are problematic? Annotated.

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