Lessons Learned: Faculty Search Committees' Attitudes Towards and Against Rubrics

Dr. Gabriella Coloyan Fleming, University of Texas, Austin

Dr. Gabriella Coloyan Fleming is a research associate in the Center for Equity in Engineering within the Cockrell School of Engineering at the University of Texas at Austin. She earned her B.S. in Mechanical Engineering from Carnegie Mellon University in 2012 and her M.S. and Ph.D. in Mechanical Engineering from UT Austin in 2014 and 2018, respectively. In addition to leading research and practice in the Center for Equity, her research interests include DEI topics in graduate education, faculty hiring, and the pathway to an academic career.

Lessons Learned: Faculty Search Committees' Attitudes Towards and Against Rubrics

Gabriella Coloyan Fleming, Maura Borrego

Introduction

Faculty search committees are the gatekeepers to the next generation of tenure-track faculty [1]. The tenure-track faculty search process typically follows similar steps: 1) development and marketing of the position, 2) narrowing the candidate pool from all applicants to a "long list" for first-round interview (often, on the phone or a video call), 3) conducting first-round interviews, 4) further narrowing the list down to a "short list" for an on-site, in-person interview, 5) deciding which candidate(s) will receive an offer, and 6) negotiation. In some cases, steps three and four are skipped, and only one round of interviews is completed.

The faculty hiring process is fraught with bias, including racial bias [1], gender bias in letters of recommendation [2], and search committee members seeking to hire people whose research areas are most similar to their own [3]. Hiring people similar to oneself extends beyond research areas. Many search committees look for candidates who would be a good "fit" (generally, scientifically, programmatically) [4, 5]. However, "fit" is highly subjective and open to the evaluator's personal biases. If an evaluator views fit through their cultural lens, women and/or people of color may be disadvantaged [5]. In a study of academic administrative and professional positions, Sagaria found that "fit was also a code word for appropriate cultural capital and the expectation that a candidate's language, presentation, appearance, and style of social interaction were the kind search chairs valued and felt comfortable with" [5]. "Fit" is also very vague, as it lacks definition of specific parameters [3].

Rubrics are one way that is often recommended to promote equity and reduce bias in faculty hiring as well as graduate admissions and performance assessments [6-8]. There is limited evidence that they lead to more equitable hiring, though one study found that rubric use led to an increased rate of hiring women faculty [9]. However, that same study also found that gender bias persisted in women candidates' research productivity scores, even when controlling for number of publications or h-index [9].

In this paper, we present the lessons learned from a qualitative study of engineering and science faculty search committees: how committees felt about rubrics, how they used them, and what strategies they used to evaluate candidates in the absence of a rubric. We also discuss how the lack of rubric use led search committees to utilize evaluation methods that invited personal bias to permeate the candidate evaluation process.

Methods

This data for this paper come from a larger study about faculty search committees and an evaluation of the University of Texas at Austin's (UT Austin) workshop for faculty search committees. We conducted, recorded, and transcribed 16 semi-structured interviews with the chair and/or a member of 11 search committees in the Cockrell School of Engineering and

College of Natural Science at UT Austin. For five search committees, both the search committee chair and another committee member (when possible, a junior faculty member and/or one with an identity from a historically excluded group) were interviewed. For the remaining six searches, either the chair or a committee member were interviewed. For this paper, we analyzed sections of the interview protocol related to whether search committees used rubrics, why they did or did not use them, how they used the rubrics, and how they evaluated candidates if they did not use a rubric. Four rounds of coding were completed. In the first round, both authors read the transcripts and identified the major themes, including search committees' attitudes and behaviors regarding rubrics. In the second round of coding, the first author marked sections of the transcripts as relevant to the study. In the third round of coding, the first author marked which transcript sections pertained to rubrics and identified the sub-themes relating to rubrics that were then used during the fourth round of coding: pro-rubric attitudes, anti-rubric attitudes, why rubrics were or were not used, how rubrics were created and/or used, and how search committees made decisions without using rubrics. The two authors are from the Cockrell School of Engineering but unaffiliated with the workshop or any of the search committees interviewed.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is that it only represents the search committees at a single institution. Part of this is due to the larger study focus evaluating that institution's workshop for faculty search committees. Outside of that focus, it can be difficult to get faculty search committee members to share their processes because of privacy and legal concerns.

Results

Rubrics were most commonly used or considered for use in the first round of narrowing the candidate pool from all applicants to those who were invited to first-round interviews (usually on Zoom, with the exception of two searches who only did one round of on-site interviews). Five of the 11 search committees utilized rubrics at this stage.

Attitudes Towards Rubrics

Some search committees had been using rubrics for several years, while others used them for the first time. The primary reason search committees used rubrics was because they recognized that use can help reduce bias in the candidate evaluation process. (We note that UT Austin's search committee workshop recommends rubrics as a way to reduce this bias.) One search committee member, whose department was using a rubric for the first time, said their search "wouldn't have been possible" without the rubric because "there are so many biases." Using a rubric also helped their search committee value candidates who could contribute to their department in many different ways: "The discussions we had before establishing the rubric shifted quite a bit after we evaluated candidates against this rubric. Because you realize the other aspects that some candidates have beyond traditional metrics that a lot of people like to evaluate, which are mostly publications and grant money." This committee member, a junior faculty member, felt so strongly about using rubrics that they took the initiative to develop one, which was later refined and adopted by the whole committee.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, not all search committees felt as positively about using rubrics. The most common reason rubrics were not adopted was due to differences between candidates from research areas with different disciplinary norms. Such sentiments were more common in searches open across research areas or in self-identified interdisciplinary departments. For example, in one research area it might be more common to publish more frequently, or in journals with different impact factors, than another area. One search committee chair who was conducting an open-area search said that in order to use a rubric, they wanted "apples and apples": candidates who were similar enough to be compared against the same standard. A search chair in another department felt similarly, stating that some candidates had high numbers of publications, while others had fewer (but higher-impact) papers, and it was difficult to create a rubric that allowed such nuance to be captured. Some committee members seemed fixated on being able to quantifiably evaluate candidates (i.e., number of publications), which is a narrow view of what a rubric is or can be used for. Another search committee chair was opposed to using rubrics because they thought "it's very, very difficult to assign sort of analytical scores to a candidate and weight research and weight service and weight teaching."

With the exception of the one aforementioned pro-rubric junior faculty member, the decision to use or not use a rubric was largely up to the search committee chair. When junior committee members were asked why (or why not) rubrics were used, they commonly responded that the chair made that decision for the rest of the committee. This is consistent with another study on search committees, which found that, during the search process in general, search committee members deferred to the committee chairs [10].

Rubric Use

Search committees' rubrics (usually self-developed) ranged in complexity. The most basic rubrics utilized scores on research; teaching; and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) on three-, four-, five-, or ten-point scales. More detailed rubrics had sub-categories within research, teaching, and DEI:

- Research: past funding (fellowships/ grants), proposal writing, publication record (a total score accounting for number of publications, journals' impact factors, citation counts/ h-index/ i10-index), trajectory (rate of publications/ grants), leadership
- Teaching: past contributions to teaching; ability to teach classes within the department (in some cases, specific classes which the department needed); mentoring or supervision of undergraduate students, graduate students, postdocs, lab technicians
- DEI: demonstrated understanding of DEI issues, past contributions, ideas of future contributions, commitment to building an inclusive community

Committees differed in how they weighted these categories. Most committees did not say if or how the categories were weighted. One committee stated that each overall candidate score was 50% research, 25% teaching, and 25% DEI. Some committees completely disqualified a candidate if they received the minimum score in any of the categories; this was almost always in the case of poor DEI statements. Committees recognized that candidates may have different levels of achievement in each of these categories depending on their career stages (e.g., a new PhD earner vs. someone who is already a tenure-track faculty member) and discussed how these

differences might impact scores or if the scores should be tailored by career stage. Some search committees calibrated the rubrics by defining what each numerical score on the scale represented and/or using applications from previous years as examples. In addition to rubrics for overall candidate evaluation, some search committees who required candidates to submit DEI statements had sub-rubrics for evaluating those statements. Committees used these additional rubrics because of the newness of DEI statements and not all committee members were familiar with how to evaluate them. Committees most often looked to existing resources on how to score DEI statements, such as the rubric on the University of California, Berkeley website [11], rather than developing their own rubrics.

Rubrics were primarily utilized to determine whom to invite for first-round (Zoom) interviews. Only two out of the 11 search committees utilized rubrics after the first stage of narrowing down candidates. In these cases, rubrics were used to evaluate candidates' Zoom interviews. These two committees asked all candidates the same questions about research, teaching, and DEI, and gave each candidate scores in those three categories. These scores were then used to decide whom to invite to a second-round, on-campus interview.

Evaluating Candidates in the Absence of Rubrics

In the absence of a rubric, committees employed a variety of strategies to narrow down the candidate pool. In many cases, these alternative evaluation methods opened up the opportunity for bias to creep in. Some search committees created a ranked list of candidates, and others gave each committee member a certain number of "favorite" candidates they could nominate for further consideration and advancement. Another search committee had members look at candidates in their research area and "rank[ed] them based on who [they] think would have the qualities that would make them a good colleague." Each committee member picking a "favorite" or using their own personal definition of a "good colleague" is subject to one's own gendered, racialized worldview and invites their own personal biases into the process.

Discussion, Implications, and Future Work

Some committees did not understand what a rubric could look like, thinking one entailed tallying a candidates' publications and directly comparing the numbers. However, as one participant discussed, rubrics can be as simple as scoring candidates from one to three on research, teaching, and DEI after agreeing what each of these scores mean. To encourage rubric use, universities or colleges can recommend an already-developed rubric [12] or create their own that search committees can use as-is or adapt to their own needs. As a result of this study on search committees, we have developed rubrics for our institution for both DEI statements and overall candidate evaluation at all stages of the faculty search process that are adaptable to any discipline.

An interesting theme that arose from the interviews was how search committees talked about DEI, including how they evaluated DEI statements, what was considered evidence of a commitment to DEI (e.g., past activities or ideas for future contributions), and how important DEI was in comparison to research and teaching. We plan to write a future paper addressing these topics.

References

- [1] Ö. Sensoy and R. DiAngelo, ""We are all for diversity, but...": How faculty hiring committees reproduce whiteness and practical suggestions for how they can change," *Harvard Educational Review,* vol. 87, no. 4, pp. 557-580, 2017, doi: 10.17763/1943-5045-87.4.557.
- [2] K. Dutt, D. L. Pfaff, A. F. Bernstein, J. S. Dillard, and C. J. Block, "Gender differences in recommendation letters for postdoctoral fellowships in geoscience," *Nature Geoscience,* vol. 9, no. 11, pp. 805-808, 2016, doi: 10.1038/ngeo2819.
- [3] D. K. White-Lewis, "The facade of fit in faculty search processes," *The Journal of Higher Education,* vol. 91, no. 6, pp. 833-857, 2020, doi: 10.1080/00221546.2020.1775058.
- [4] C. B. Wright and N. L. Vanderford, "What faculty hiring committees want," *Nature Biotechnology,* vol. 35, no. 9, pp. 885-887, 2017.
- [5] M. A. D. Sagaria, "An exploratory model of filtering in administrative searches: Toward counter-hegemonic discourses," *The Journal of Higher Education,* vol. 73, no. 6, pp. 677-710, 2002, doi: 10.1353/jhe.2002.0055.
- [6] N. Bhalla, "Strategies to improve equity in faculty hiring," *Molecular biology of the cell,* vol. 30, no. 22, pp. 2744-2749, 2019.
- [7] A. Jonsson and G. Svingby, "The use of scoring rubrics: Reliability, validity and educational consequences," *Educational research review,* vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 130-144, 2007, doi: 10.1016/j. edurev.2007.05.002.
- [8] J. R. Posselt, *Inside graduate admissions*. Harvard University Press, 2016.
- [9] M. Blair-Loy, O. V. Mayorova, P. C. Cosman, and S. I. Fraley, "Can rubrics combat gender bias in faculty hiring?," *Science,* vol. 377, no. 6601, pp. 35-37, 2022.
- [10] L. Hakkola and S. J. Dyer, "Role conflict: How search committee chairs negotiate faculty status, diversity, and equity in faculty searches," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education,* vol. 15, no. 5, pp. 583-595, 2022, doi: 10.1037/dhe0000386.
- [11] UC Berkeley Office for Faculty Equity and Welfare. "Rubric for Assessing Candidate Contributions to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging." https://ofew.berkeley.edu/recruitment/contributions-diversity/rubric-assessing-candidate-contributions-diversity-equity (accessed February 6, 2023.
- [12] E. Cosgriff-Hernandez *et al.*, "A roadmap towards equitable hiring to diversify biomedical engineering faculty," 2022.