Recommendations for Ensuring the Integrity of Faculty Searches
Faculty of Arts and Sciences

Note: This document reflects practices in place before the COVID-19 pandemic. If any searches should take place in AY 2021-2022, and depending on the status of pandemic restrictions, some of the practices below will need to be modified.

Please refer to the *FAS Appointment and Promotion Handbook* (available at https://academic-appointments.fas.harvard.edu/) for current policies and procedures for conducting faculty searches. The material below, culled from behavioral science evidence and departmental feedback, highlights critical moments in conducting tenure-track and senior searches. These moments deserve close attention to ensure that the search process has integrity and leads to the appointment of the best available candidates.

We recommend that all search committee members read this document before a search begins. Prior to each stage in the search process, the committee chair should remind the committee of the issues described in each section below:

1. Launching the search
2. Narrowing the list
3. Campus visits, interviewing finalists, and job talks
4. Departmental/SEAS area discussion and vote

1. Launching the search

- **Define the search** broadly so as not to focus too narrowly on subfields with few specialists. Fields grow and move in ways that we may not fully perceive at the start of a search, and the search definition should allow for applicants whose work may speak to us in unexpected ways. As you review candidates, consider, along with the overall quality of the candidate, the trajectory of the work and the future of that field.

  Because it is hard to predict from where stellar candidates may emerge, the advertisement should be written in an open and non-exclusionary way. (It is also helpful to avoid characterizing, or internally conceiving of, a search as a direct replacement for a departing colleague.)

  Many exceptional candidates do not apply to Harvard because they feel that Harvard is out of reach. We encourage search committees to compose advertisements that sound welcoming to all candidates. Evidence has shown that barriers to entry, both perceived and real, keep some of the best candidates from applying. Analyze carefully the wording of the advertisement, especially any descriptions of candidate qualities. Research has shown that gendered traits in advertisements deter men or women from applying if they think those traits do not apply to their group.
- Ensure that the **search committee membership** is diverse in academic perspectives as well as qualities such as career stage, gender, and ethnicity. (Note: Evidence suggests that men

and women may be equally biased in favor of male candidates and that the presence of women on a committee does not ensure that women candidates are more likely to be considered.) The efficiency of a small committee of like-minded people should be balanced against the benefits of a larger committee of more than three members. The chair of the department/SEAS area chair is responsible for ensuring the diversity of the committee. The chair of the search committee is responsible for including expertise from around the University, as needed. Remember that tenure and tenure-track search committees must include a tenured faculty member from another department/area.

We recommend that, whenever possible, tenure-track faculty be included in the search committee (e.g., when conducting searches for tenure-track faculty). Tenure-track faculty are among the best detectors of talent among their peers, yet they can be less likely to offer suggestions unless asked. Getting input from tenure-track faculty in senior searches is very important, even if they cannot vote. When tenure-track and senior faculty differ significantly on the type of candidate to pursue, it is especially important to pause, ask why, and, as needed, consult with experts outside Harvard.

In general, signaling openness to information, advice, and feedback (both within the department/area and when seeking input outside Harvard) should be maximized during a search.

- Before the search begins, the committee should discuss **methods for actively recruiting women and underrepresented minorities.** (E.g., talking with graduate students and colleagues at Harvard and elsewhere.) Why is this important? Availability and anchoring biases prevent us from thinking of people outside traditionally represented groups. Moreover, it often occurs that some names are mentioned early in the process, and those candidates may have a disproportionate likelihood of being advanced to the short list. In each discipline, some institutions appear to do an excellent job of recruiting women and minorities. Critical mass then plays a role in attracting other candidates. At a minimum, please post the advertisement in professional journals, websites, and listservs within the discipline, including those geared toward women and minorities. Whenever possible, the chair of the search committee should attend, in the year of the search, social gatherings organized by groups such as minority or women's caucuses at professional meetings. The signaling value of such attendance is greater than may be recognized.
- **Review data on past departmental/area searches** to understand the broader context of your search. Analysis shows that many Harvard departments/areas do not keep pace with the diversity in Ph.D. pools emerging from the Ivy+ schools. The FAS Office for Faculty Affairs can help you with obtaining data, as needed. The Edgerley Family Dean of the FAS takes this issue seriously; we must not lose the best talent to other institutions, due to avoidable failures of perception, detection, and prediction of talent.
- Before considering candidates, **discuss selection criteria** and a process for rating applications relative to teaching, research, and mentoring skills. Discuss how to weight different qualifications. Research has shown that people tend to generate selection criteria to fit a candidate they have grown attached to, rather than having criteria in place and finding candidates who match those criteria. Discussing criteria in the search committee is important for all searches. It is especially useful for fields undergoing changes in theoretical positions and methods, where new areas of expertise are in demand. There is nothing wrong with

changing criteria during a search if the change is undertaken deliberately—for intellectual or professional reasons, and not as an unconscious response to a particular candidate.

- **Consider deadlines.** Posting your advertisement early is one of the simplest ways to advantage your search. Depending on the norms of your discipline, application deadlines will vary. Our peer institutions may have earlier deadlines than Harvard. If Harvard's January winter break delays your candidate interviews until February, you may be interviewing candidates who already have offers in hand. While norms differ according to discipline, we recommend that you consider conducting interviews as early in the academic year as possible.

2. Narrowing the list

- As the committee moves towards narrowing the list, **review the search process** to determine whether sufficient effort has been made to recruit a diverse pool of candidates. Additional steps can always be taken to encourage women and minorities to apply for the position. Please take those steps now. This is not to favor women and minorities but to improve the quality of your pool. This also recognizes the reality that institutions like Harvard cause some candidates to self-select out. Throughout the search, ask yourself, do the pool, short list, and then finalist reflect the diversity of candidates emerging from the best Ph.D. programs? If not, pause and ask why, and engage with the divisional dean/John A. Paulson Dean of SEAS to find additional ways to enhance the pool. Do not rush to a final list unless you are certain you have the best candidates in the world.

  Be cautious about assumptions that scholars are unavailable or unmovable. Disregard comments like, "This person is impossible to move," until the candidate has said it. Strong candidates should not be ruled out from a sense that their partners will not move to the area. People's priorities can change if an offer is extended to them.

- Include all committee members in the **evaluation process.** A study has shown that more equal distribution in conversational turn-taking—i.e., not having a few members dominate the conversation—is a stronger predictor of a team's success than either the averaged or maximum intelligence of individual team members. The chair of the search committee should encourage reticent members to offer their opinion. Often, for expediency, a few committee members will read the full set of applications to narrow down the pool. We recommend that all committee members read a subset of the applications. This allows the committee's diversity to actually influence early choices.

  As you narrow the pool to a medium list, apply criteria consistently to all candidates, even if your favored candidate ranks low on a particular criterion. Let the data stare back at you so that you can see (and possibly reshape) your judgment. At all times, adopt the stance that the search is an evolving process, rather than one that locks the door quickly. A nagging feeling that you could do better is a valid basis for revisiting decisions. Throughout the process, if committee members identify outstanding candidates who are not in the pool, the committee should follow up with these candidates.

- **Rank candidates on the criteria**, such as teaching, research, and mentoring capacity. Why? These criteria will be used not only in this search but also during associate and tenure reviews. Ask if the demands of your discipline *as it now exists* signal the need to expand the

criteria by which to judge talent, e.g., the ability to collaborate across disciplines or to master new technologies. These are rarely considered when we think in traditional ways about talent; but they can matter when evaluating contributions over the course of a professorship.

- Recognize and be able to work through the **evaluation biases** that often affect the review of women, minorities, and groups that are new entrants into a discipline. Evidence from the behavioral sciences repeatedly shows that people tend to underestimate women and minorities' qualifications when evaluating their applications and job talks, and that this does not emerge from any conscious bias. That's what makes decisions hard: the invisible nature of preferences. Ask yourself, when you find yourself strongly preferring a particular candidate, why that may be the case. Irrelevant features (such as sharing an *alma mater*) may account for feelings of comfort and admiration that could influence the environment in which candidates are judged. Increasingly, the evidence shows that decisions are affected by the help that we provide some candidates over others. Because helping is a positive behavior, it is not likely to raise concerns, yet it can shape the outcome. Ask yourself how much a candidate's characteristics deviate from the culture's (and likely your own) image of the "strong" type of candidate. Remember, it is not your job to hire someone you like or a person with similar tastes in non-academic matters. Rather, you are here to hire somebody who will make the department/area strong, even after you have left Harvard.
- As the committee moves from the longer list to the short list, **consider including the highest-ranked women and minorities**, or provide details on why these individuals were not on the short list. Why is this important and not a bias in itself? Several studies suggest that equal achievements are not regarded as equal. For example, a recent study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences showed that even today, men and women in academic settings like our own select men over equally qualified women. According to the study, people read identical accomplishments differently and tend to see males as more competent than females. In other studies in the employment setting, white Americans with a felony record fare just as well, and even better, than African-Americans with a clean record. We encourage you to ask yourself what you are doing to correct for what we know to be fairly widespread differences in evaluation. Be wary of "intuition" as your guide. Be prepared, and ask others, to explain a rejection or retention of a candidate due to "fit," for example. "Fit" is often a proxy for factors that, upon consideration, should not influence our decisions. (Harvard is required under its affirmative action guidelines to provide information on why women or minorities were not chosen. Be prepared to answer that question with evidence.)
- It is of utmost importance to remember that the committee's job is not to send a final list of potential interviewees to the Divisional Dean/SEAS Dean. Instead, this is a moment when the search committee chair is expected to **discuss the short list with the Divisional Dean/SEAS Dean** and determine whether it represents the field and the applicant pool. If it does not, the chair should be ready to explain why and to work with the Divisional Dean/SEAS Dean to get further information before proceeding. As you know, in the absence of a compelling explanation, the Divisional Dean/SEAS Dean is obliged to require that the search committee reconsider the composition of the short list. For example, if the gender distribution in the pool is 50:50, the law of small numbers dictates that in a given year, your short list may consist entirely of all men or all women. If you bring such a list to the Divisional Dean/SEAS Dean, you will need to demonstrate that this is rare—by providing

comparisons to short lists from preceding departmental/SEAS area searches and demonstrating that selection behavior is unbiased over time. Deans can understand an imbalanced short list, but multiple searches with all-female or all-male candidates likely signal a flawed decision process. Your best baseline is the pipeline of Ph.D.s emerging in your discipline from the top institutions. Seek out this information as a check on your process.

3. Campus visits, interviewing finalists, and job talks

- **Especially when committee members are less familiar with a field, it is very useful to read a candidate's work before the interview.** Some departments/areas hold a seminar on the work of one or more candidates prior to interviewing, which provides a stronger foundation on which the interview day and the job talk can build. In all cases, committee members should be sure to read the candidates' work before the committee's final discussion of the candidates.
- **Schedule visits with consistency**. To acquire good comparative data, schedule equal time for each candidate (including internal candidates) to interview and to meet with as many of the same people as possible. While faculty schedules can be hard to coordinate, make sure that at least a small core group of faculty, besides the search committee, meets with each candidate. Provide candidates with opportunities to interact with departmental/area faculty in multiple venues, both formal and informal, and remember that every aspect of the visit is not just part of the evaluation process, but is also an opportunity for recruitment. Adopt the perspective of the visiting candidate, and remember that the individual's experience can affect not only this recruitment but others in the future. Research shows that subtle indicators of dismissal or disrespect are easily detected, and this can impede progress in recruiting for many years. (Many of us have heard candidates share vivid, unpleasant memories of decades-old interviews.)
- It is hard to create equal interviews for all candidates. And yet, this equity is essential to develop an informed basis for choosing the best finalist. Develop a **common set of "core" questions** for all candidates, to allow comparative judgment, and evaluate candidates' responses according to the criteria developed earlier. These core questions should be supplemented with questions pertinent to each individual. Be aware that some questions cannot be asked, and learn what they are. *All faculty on search committees must read the attached "Guide to Unacceptable Interview Questions" and understand that it is illegal to base your hiring decisions on the answers to such questions.* If a candidate voluntarily provides information in non-permissible areas, the best practice is to make no further comments or inquiries.
- **The job talk**. Job talks are important. They reveal scholars' ability to teach and communicate, their level of preparation, and skill in speaking to a community broader than those in their own area of expertise. **The job talk should be allowed to unfold in a manner that can accurately reveal the candidate's talents.** While the norm in some disciplines is for audience members to interject questions early in the talk, preventing the candidate from completing planned remarks, this is not an optimal way to assess the quality of work or the ability to communicate. The formal job talk should allow the candidate to proceed without

interruption, with questions occurring at the end of the talk. However, the ability of a candidate to engage with questions and even to spar is also critical to classroom performance. We recommend a second, informal "chalk talk," where the expectation is that the audience and speaker will exchange views throughout.

Videotape job talks. Consider scheduling audio-visual staff to tape all job talks. Ideally, the tapes should be available online (with password protection) at the end of the day of the talk. Make AV arrangements well in advance, and the search committee chair should share the link to the video as soon as it is ready. All voting faculty unable to attend the job talk should view the video before the department holds its final discussions about candidates.

While it is important to have standard practices for job talks, be careful not to place undue emphasis on the job talk as a determinant of the final outcome. Some faculty rely too heavily on the talk because it is easier to attend the talk and generate a quick impression than to do the hard work of reading the candidate's work. As mentioned earlier, committee members should read candidates' work before the committee's final discussion of the candidates.

- **Avoid informal discussions about the merits and demerits of a candidate outside scheduled search committee and departmental/area meetings.** During the interview day and immediately after, it is tempting to discuss candidates with individual colleagues. It is advisable not to do so, even informally, especially with others who have voting rights. This may be hard, but it allows for independence of thought and permits a diversity of perspectives to develop up until the moment of voting. Even comments made in passing can influence others and predetermine the outcome. Tenure-track colleagues who detect that a tenured colleague prefers a particular candidate may be less likely to speak up for another, possibly better candidate. More introverted colleagues, who do not offer assessments easily and loudly, may have less impact than they should. One suggested method is to ask faculty to write a brief evaluation of the candidate immediately after the interview day (memory can play tricks on assessments, so timing is important). These evaluations can be forwarded to an administrator who does not have voting rights. That administrator can make all evaluations (both received and actively solicited) available to the search committee for its deliberations, before the committee presents its views to the department/area.

4. Departmental/SEAS area discussion and vote

- It is important to avoid a truncated, hasty discussion of candidates. **Please schedule the department's/area's meeting** at a time when the vast majority of members can attend. Find out in advance who cannot attend and get their opinion in writing, to share at the meeting. Allow sufficient time for discussion of the proposed candidate(s).

  Some departments/areas find it helpful to schedule a discussion meeting separate from a voting meeting, on two different days. This separation allows the discussion to "settle" before a vote occurs. Whether you have one meeting or two, a useful norm is for every voting member to offer an opinion before a vote is taken. It is the chair's responsibility to make sure every colleague with voting rights has a chance to express his/her/their view. Otherwise, a call for a vote can prematurely curtail discussion.
- During the discussion, the search committee should inform the department/area of both the criteria applied during the search and the efforts made to attract a diverse applicant pool. As there are pros and cons to each candidate, it is useful to mention both, so that faculty can

weigh these relative to the criteria. All discussants should **be alert to irrelevant factors influencing decisions**.

- Follow **consistent departmental/area procedure** for all candidates considered. Observe the "Guide to Unacceptable Interview Questions," and do not allow discussion of impermissible considerations.

While the practices described in this document may initially seem difficult or strange, they emerge from evidence in the decision sciences that can help us to achieve our goal: to hire the strongest candidates for the faculty at Harvard.

Attachment: "Guide to Unacceptable Interview Questions"

Online resources:

1. FAS Office for Faculty Affairs (https://facultyresources.fas.harvard.edu/fas-office-faculty-affairs).

2. Website for FAS Faculty and Researchers (https://facultyresources.fas.harvard.edu/).

3. Harvard University Office of the Senior Vice Provost for Faculty Development and Diversity (https://faculty.harvard.edu/).

4. University of Michigan ADVANCE Program (http://advance.umich.edu/).