Common views on diversity in hiring—and some responses.

1. Previous search committee chairs have sometimes heard the following, or similar, statements from their search committee members and other faculty in their departments. These views may be raised during your discussions of diversity. Some suggestions for responding to such statements are provided.

“I am fully in favor of diversity, but I don’t want to sacrifice quality for diversity.” No one wants to or recommends sacrificing quality for diversity; indeed, no qualified minority/female candidate wants to be considered on the basis of diversity alone. The search committee should be responsible not only for finding and including highly qualified minority and female candidates, but also for ensuring that the candidates and the department/university in general know that they were selected on the basis of merit.

“We have to focus on hiring the ‘best.’” True. But what is the best? If we do not actively recruit a diverse pool of candidates, how will we know we have attracted the best possible candidates to apply? What are the criteria for the “best?” What is “best” for the department? The university? The students? Diverse faculty members will bring new and different perspectives, interests, and research questions that can enhance knowledge, understanding, and academic excellence in any field. Diverse and excellent faculty members can help attract and retain students from underrepresented groups. Diverse faculty members can enhance the educational experience of all students—minority and majority. Interacting with diverse faculty offers all students valuable lessons about the increasingly diverse world in which we live, and lessons about society, cultural differences, value systems, etc.

“Campuses are so focused on diversifying their faculties that heterosexual white males have no chance,” or “Recruiting women and minority faculty diminishes opportunities for white male faculty.” A study examining the experiences of scholars who have recently earned doctorates and won prestigious fellowships (Ford, Mellon, and Spencer) found no evidence of discrimination against white men. Indeed, white men who had some expertise related to diversity had a significant advantage in the job market. Another study examining nationwide faculty hires in Sociology in 1991–92 also found no evidence of disadvantages for white men. Indeed, this study found that, despite some improvement, disadvantages still existed for “[white] women, minority men, and most especially minority women.”

“There are no women/minorities in our field, or no qualified women/minorities.” Though women and minorities may be scarce in some fields, it is rarely the case that there are none. The search committee, as part of its efforts to build its pool, must actively seek out qualified women and minority candidates.

“The scarcity of faculty of color in the sciences means that few are available, those who are available are in high demand, and we can’t compete.” In a recent study of the recipients of prestigious Ford Fellowships, all of whom are minorities, the majority, 54%, were not aggressively pursued for faculty positions despite holding postdoctoral research appointments for up to six years after finishing their
“Minority candidates would not want to come to our campus.” The search committee should not make such decisions for the candidates, but should let the candidates decide if the campus and/or community are a good match for them. The search committee should show potential candidates how they might fit into our campus, provide them with resources for finding out more about our campus and community, and help them make connections to individuals and groups who may share their interests, race, ethnicity, etc.

2. Previous search committee chairs report that the following assumptions may hamper efforts to recruit a diverse and excellent pool of candidates. Some potential responses include:

“Don’t respond to those who don’t respond.” In fact, many of the finalists in searches across campus—for positions as diverse as assistant professor, provost, and chancellor—had to be convinced to apply. Some candidates may think their credentials don’t fit, that they are too junior, or that they don’t want to live in Boston. Talk to prospective candidates and ask them to let the committee evaluate their credentials. Remind them that without knowing who will be in the pool, you can’t predict how any given candidate will compare and ask them to postpone making judgments themselves until a later time in the process. Once they are in the pool, either side can always decide that the fit isn’t a good one, but if candidates don’t enter the pool, the committee loses the opportunity to consider them. Another argument to use with junior candidates is that the application process will provide valuable experience even if their application is unsuccessful in this search. Remind them that going through the process will make them more comfortable and knowledgeable when the job of their dreams comes along. Individual attention and persistence pay off—there are many examples from other searches of “reluctant” candidates who needed to be coaxed into the pool and turned out to be stellar finalists.

“Excellent candidates need the same credentials as the person leaving the position.” There are many examples of highly successful people who have taken nontraditional career routes. Some of our best faculty were recruited when they had less than the typical amount of postdoctoral experience, were employed at teaching colleges, had taken a break from their careers, or were working in the private sector or in government positions. At the national level, it is interesting to note that none of the five female deans of colleges of engineering in the U.S. were department chairs before becoming deans, and they are all highly successful deans. Think outside the box and recruit from unusual sources. You can always eliminate candidates from the pool later.

“People from Group X don’t make good teachers/administrators/faculty members, etc.” We all make assumptions about people based on the university granting their degree, the part of the country or world they come from, and their ethnicity or gender. Encourage your committee members to recognize this and avoid making assumptions. Your pool will only be hurt by comments such as, “People from the South never adjust to Boston’s weather,” “We never recruit well from the coasts,” or “There are no women [in a given field].”

This document is based on Searching for Excellence & Diversity: A Guide for Search Committee Chairs, a guide developed by the Women in Science & Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI) at the University of Wisconsin Madison.

1 A valuable literature review and an extensive annotated bibliography of research on the impact of diversity on college campuses can be found in Daryl G. Smith, et al., Diversity Works: The Emerging Picture of How


4 Smith, Achieving Faculty Diversity, 4, 65–70.


6 Smith, Achieving Faculty Diversity, 4, 95.

7 Turner, Diversifying the Faculty, 16.