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Diversity in Academe

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What Search Committees See Across the Table

Sandy Huffaker for The Chronicle

Search committees might take refuge in predicting that a candidate won't come to a campus because "it's not cosmopolitan enough," says JoAnn Moody, a faculty-diversity consultant.

By Audrey Williams June

Caroline Sotello Turner's career as a professor spans 23 years at three institutions. At all the job interviews she's had over the years, she wanted assurance that her future colleagues were truly interested in diversity. Sometimes she has had to uncover signs of that commitment on her own.

"I would get asked a lot of questions about why I'm interested in coming, but I'm evaluating their campus, too," says Ms. Turner, a Latina newly hired as a professor in the doctoral program in educational leadership at California State University at Sacramento. "Even if they don't have very many faculty of color, then what about talking about what faculty are doing in communities of color? I think some colleges don't sell themselves enough when it comes to what they're doing as far as diversity is concerned."

Nationwide, 17.4 percent of full-time faculty members were Asian, black, Hispanic, or American Indian in 2007, the latest year for which data are available. To be sure, the number of minority

scholars increased 58 percent from 1997 to 2007. But while many colleges have made concerted efforts to diversify their faculty ranks, there are still some programs, particularly in certain fields, where minority scholars and women remain underrepresented.

Search-committee missteps—like the oversight described by Ms. Turner—are often to blame.

"A lot of things happen in the search committee," says Ms. Turner, who wrote a guidebook, published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, on how to recruit a diverse faculty. "There are a lot of judgments being made."

One of the most damaging is a belief held by some scholars that diversity and quality are mutually exclusive, says Marybeth Gasman, an associate professor of higher education at the University of Pennsylvania.

"What happens is someone will say, We really want to bring in diverse faculty, and someone else will say, We also want to maintain quality," says Ms. Gasman, a *Chronicle* blogger whose research interests include diversity in higher education. "So if you start out with the idea that if you want to have diversity you have to sacrifice quality, then that right away colors the decisions of search committees."

Also influencing search-committee decisions are unconscious biases. Efforts to hire minority faculty members are most likely to go awry, experts say, when committee members deny that such biases exist.

For instance, a candidate's clothing may trigger a negative reaction from some members of a search panel. A job seeker with an accent may rub others the wrong way.

"Everybody has some kind of unconscious bias," says Abbie Robinson-Armstrong, vice president for intercultural affairs at Loyola Marymount University, where search committees are trained to recognize it. "But more often than not, the search committee has not dealt with the level of unconscious bias floating around the room. When a candidate walks in, you want to be able to shake yourself free of all that and judge them on what really matters."

Doing that isn't as simple as it sounds for some—particularly when a tenure-track faculty job is at stake. "All these personal opinions about the candidate just come galloping out," says JoAnn Moody,

a consultant who specializes in helping colleges diversify their faculty ranks. "Psychoanalyzing the job candidate becomes rampant."

Committees might predict that a candidate won't come to a campus because "it's not cosmopolitan enough," Ms. Moody says. "Or it's, 'I know she's gotten this far, but there just isn't enough diversity in this town—this wonderful candidate is going to be miserable here.'"

Gilda Barabino, a professor of biomedical engineering at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has seen how such assumptions can play out. She once served on a search committee for a small department at a college that chose not to make an offer to a candidate from an underrepresented minority. The members reasoned that the candidate would "have all these offers, and we're small, and they're not going to take ours anyway," she recalls. "I just thought, We're not going to let our offer be one of the ones this top person gets? Maybe this person doesn't want to be in a pressure cooker. Maybe their spouse has a great offer in the area, so they're willing to look at us."

Indeed, Ms. Turner says it would have been easy for her current institution, Sacramento, where she just began working, to think she wouldn't be happy there. But the California native points to at least two factors that helped make her a good fit: She was eager to return to her home state after working at Arizona State University, and the opportunity to be a part of Sacramento's growing doctoral program in educational leadership was especially appealing to her.

"You can't just assume that people won't come, and give up," Ms. Turner says.

It's also not a smart move to rely on some search committees' limited networks to fill open positions. That's because when committees end up looking for someone who "looks, acts, sounds, and speaks exactly the way they do, for an underrepresented minority, that's very hard to do," says James Mack, an associate professor of chemistry at the University of Cincinnati. "You're looking for something that doesn't really exist."

Tapping prospective colleagues from largely homogeneous networks will almost certainly yield a candidate pool that reflects the status quo, say those with search experience.

Mr. Mack, a professor at Cincinnati since 2003, says that in his own discipline, organic chemistry, it's impossible to form a deep pool of underrepresented minority candidates by recruiting only those who hold Ph.D.'s from Ivy League or other top-ranked programs. "A lot of minorities aren't at those institutions," he says. "So when you turn around and say, 'I can't find anybody,' there's a reason for that."

An African-American with a doctorate from the University of New Hampshire, Mr. Mack adds that he and other minority scholars he knows who graduated from institutions such as George Washington University and the University of Nebraska "are doing quite well."

Still, it takes some work for faculty members to avoid the urge to "clone" themselves when hiring new professors. Recruiting widely and early—well before an actual job opening crops up—is key. Colleges that leave recruiting solely to the search committee are setting themselves up to fall short of any diversity goals.

"You have to be doing active recruiting all the time," says Sheila S. Hemami, a professor of electrical engineering at Cornell University and an advocate of recruiting more female engineers into academe. "Everybody should have their eyes open for good people."

Good candidates, however, might not rise to the top of a search committee's list if that committee doesn't have a diversity champion in its midst. Any ethnicity will do.

"I think there needs to be someone on the committee who is fully invested in trying to identify as many women and minority candidates as possible," says John T. Rose, dean of diversity and compliance at Hunter College, of the City University of New York. "You need somebody who says, 'We have to do this and do it in a very mindful way.'"

Ms. Turner, without naming an institution, says she's been that diversity advocate when "certain things have been overlooked" by search committees. She would examine a candidate's résumé, for example, to learn why an otherwise strong candidate had a not-so-robust publishing record.

"It might turn out that this person has been focusing on some programming that was very unique—only this person could have done it—and maybe it's something they can bring to our school," she says. For example, faculty members of color often work in their ethnic communities as part of their scholarship. In that light, she suggests, "some of the judgments search committees make just need to be critically analyzed."

One diversity official did exactly that during a faculty search at his institution. A minority candidate who had made the short list for a faculty job told the search committee that he had no experience teaching a particular course that the department wanted taught. The committee, in turn, said it didn't have a "good feel" for the candidate, who otherwise appeared to meet all the job requirements. (The official did not want to be named, because of the sensitive nature of the search.)

"I tried to get to the bottom of what they were feeling," he says. He learned that committee members viewed the candidate's remarks as a refusal to teach the course. That discovery prompted the official to offer another vantage point to the committee members: "I talked to them about how some people

are more modest than others, and if they haven't done something before, they wouldn't want you to think they have professional experience that they don't have. They hadn't thought about what he said in that way."

The new information was effective: The college made the candidate an offer.

In the end, diversity experts say, too many missteps during the hiring process can thwart even the best intentions.

"The people who are responding to these jobs are a part of a network," says Mr. Rose. "So how you treat them ultimately gets around. They have to have a good feel for the process that you're putting them through."

"You're doing a search, but this is not a one-way street. It's a two-way street."