Hiring Departmental Faculty

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Choosing new professors to hire is among the most consequential work done by college or university academic departments, but the conduct of such searches has often been left unexamined and undiscussed. Here I offer some simple, well-tested guidelines for handling departmental faculty searches, aimed at hiring the best possible person for the job. Obviously, these guidelines represent an ideal; the realities of deans' priorities, university policies, and departmental politics will inject themselves soon enough. That said, we should at least start with the *best* method, knowing that the *possible* method may eventually be different.

In my 26 years in higher education, I've seen and heard about countless searches, and have participated in scores; I've run searches for high-level administrators, one-course adjunct professors, and pretty much everything in between; and I've talked a lot with people who've run many, many other searches. Along the way, I've made some big mistakes – real howlers, once or twice – and our department has also enjoyed some spectacular successes. But mostly I've learned, systematically. After every search, I sit down and ask, "What did we do well? And badly? Are these mistakes that we've made before? How can we avoid them in the future?" Based on this history of failure and success, I've reached conclusive recommendations. Here they are:

1) Decide what you really want.[2] Keep it simple.

2) Keep the initial candidate pool as wide as possible.

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[2] "You" refers to the Search Committee.

3) Pour time into hiring decisions.

4) Don't fall in love with a candidate.

5) Hire for demonstrated strength, not for lack of weakness.

6) Rely on the record.

Let us consider these recommendations in order.

1) Decide what you really want. Keep it simple.

Usually, committees draw up a "wish list" for the successful candidate: we want a productive scholar in the key area that we most need (or where we're pushing), a fine classroom teacher, a supportive, helpful colleague, with lots of growth potential, who will enjoy living here, can cover several different fields we want to offer, will stay here more than a few years, and who will more or less solve all our problems. Here's a sample job listing, posted by one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the U.S.:

> "We are seeking applicants deeply committed both to teaching academically-oriented undergraduates and to conducting basic research in the sociology of work, organizations, and markets. The successful candidate should have a substantial interest in race and ethnicity in an American context, with emphasis on economic sociology as a vehicle for understanding the situation of African-Americans. Demonstrated competence in classical sociological theory and quantitative methods is required."

That's asking a lot.

And this doesn't only happen with entry-level positions; it may be more common at high levels. I once chaired a search for a Dean of Admission at my college, and an important trustee told me that we should prepare "a detailed job description, with a list of at least a dozen skills that would be needed." I smiled and thanked him, and conscientiously ignored his advice. In trying to meet the requirements, candidates would have been selected for their looks, personality, personal charm, apparent intelligence, computer skills, willingness to travel, writing and speaking abilities, years of experience, knowledge of our region, established contacts in the field, etc.

That's the wrong approach. The more detailed your requirements and the longer the list of needed skills, the more likely you'll hire a crashing mediocrity.[3] She'll have all those skills, and won't be truly excellent at anything. Computer skills are necessarily in any contemporary Admission Office, for instance, but a good Dean can hire in such expertise; she needn't have the skill herself.

In our Sociology Department at Hamilton what we really want is an excellent teacher for high-quality undergraduates. What matters for us is the proven ability to be a great teacher with the kind of students we have and want. Many things *don't* matter. Being an "OK" teacher is not very helpful for us; strong teaching with strong students is crucial, but mass appeal is not necessary; scholarship is not the first criterion, although in practice the intellectual horsepower required in being excellent with good students frequently brings good scholarship with it. We'd like to hire a pleasant person, but that's not how we pick finalists. As for personality, I would say that integrity is a necessary characteristic in an excellent teacher, so that does count. Our founding department chair used to ask, "Is this person a good human being?", a standard that really does work well in preventing disasters. Beyond this, though, we aren't hiring anyone to be friends with us. We've explicitly discussed, and reluctantly set aside, candidates' suitability for teaching us, the faculty, new things. And interestingly, it's not crucial – and not even necessary – to be dynamic, or charismatic, or have a "deep commitment to teaching." If you're a great

[3] As statisticians remind us, the joint probability of a series of independent events equals the (multiplicative) product of their individual probabilities. In other words, as you add requirements, the chance of meeting all of them soon becomes vanishingly small.

teacher with great students, you're in. The simplicity of the standard makes the selection process far simpler. And it frees us from the more conventional rankings of candidates.

Again, the key issue is: What do you really want? A pleasant colleague for 30 years? A great undergraduate teacher? A famous person, to add to the luster of your program? A superbly competent, productive researcher? A workhorse to carry the department's service obligations? Once you've settled on the goal, it's much easier to get there. If the priority is a diversity hire, be clear on that; then recognize that you've just dramatically limited your pool. So don't be foolish and dogmatically require three or four other "must have" characteristics. Statistically, with every factor you add, the odds of success go down.

Finally, write it down – put on paper "what you really want," so in the crush of time and the excitement of finding a great person who doesn't fit, you'll remember your goal.[4] Put that piece of paper in a file somewhere, so years later, after your new person is clearly part of the program, you can go back and remember what you wanted, and see what you got. That way you avoid the common mistake of changing your goals *after* the hire: picking a person who's a great scholar, then firing her for not teaching well; hiring a teacher, then firing him for lack of publication; hiring in a representative of some group, and then later – when she is still that same person you hired – firing her for not being something else. People in the business world call this mistake "hire for A, fire for B." I've seen colleges hire someone because he's a faculty spouse, then fire him later for not publishing – even though he's still the faculty spouse. Or hire an excellent coach, then fire him for enforcing policies that he explicitly announced while still a candidate. Or pick a president because he's charming, well-spoken, intelligent, and totally committed to getting along with people, and then be miffed because "he's unwilling to fight" for what he wants. Most failed hirings occur when the candidate simply continues to be himself or herself, and the college decides – after moving the person to a new home, planting them in a new job, spinning their family into new settings – it now wants something different from what it hired. This practice, so widespread as to be almost the norm, accounts for most of the unsuccessful hires I've seen. It's rarely the candidate's fault; it's the employer's.

[4] Sometimes the opportunity is so good you'll change the goal; that's okay, but don't pretend you aren't doing it.

2) Keep the candidate pool as wide as possible.

Too often, departments narrow their pool of candidates at the outset, before even seeing the records of real people. This may take the form of picking a substantive area that either "we need to cover" (plausible) or "we'd like to have" (the old wish list problem again). When you make a minor factor into a *sine qua non*, you eliminate most of the best people. When you choose areas to advertise (in my discipline, it might be stratification, quantitative methods, or criminology, for instance), you immediately eliminate the majority of otherwise strong candidates who may well fill your needs splendidly. Remember: *the more things you want, the fewer great things you'll get.*

Consider this. In American sociology, some 300 new Ph.D.s a year are looking for jobs. If we say "we want our new person to teach research methods," and use that as a selection criteria up front – in our ads, in our first cuts – we reduce the pool to perhaps 50 people who can plausibly claim to be "in methods." We've cut out, before seeing their records, 250 people who might well be able to teach methods, but either don't think they can, or have never tried, or may in fact be so good at other things that we wouldn't care if they can teach methods. Most strong graduate students have the substantive expertise to teach undergraduate research methods. But we'll never know. Several years ago we offered a position to a specialist in Chinese gender studies – a very minor field when considering all of sociology. "China" showed all over her vita; she was clearly tracked as a China expert. But her quality as a teacher was outstanding, and she had the intellectual power to work with our students. It turned out that she could easily teach research methods, gender, family, international development, and a number of other strong undergraduate courses, with no problem at all, as well as courses on China. Her background was quite broad, and she had the ability to teach many fields on short notice; we only had to get past the fact that her "major field" was not one we would have picked. But other schools dropped her from consideration immediately, seeing that she wasn't in the areas they "needed."

Or this: more recently we hired a woman from UC Berkeley, smart as a whip, whose listed area is Uzbekistan. *Uzbekistan*, that's right. Applying for small college jobs she hit a wall. Few small schools can afford such a narrow, not to say obscure, specialization. But our

criterion was "excellent teacher for high-level undergraduates," and she seemed to be that. Her intellectual capability was top-notch, her teaching quite strong, and – when you actually got down to talking with her – she could fluently discuss culture, politics, stratification, research methods (in some fascinating detail), and, for that matter, American society. Her specialty was Uzbekistan (she learned the language to do her research, on top of knowing Russian already); but for undergraduates, she knew about many other things that they needed. Most of our competitors didn't even consider her, I suspect *(Uzbekistan!)*. Finding great candidates sometimes means finding candidates other departments don't recognize as being great.[5]

Keeping the pool wide also helps you avoid fighting over the conventionally "top ranked" candidates. I remember in graduate school seeing candidates who were "on the circuit" – visiting six or eight different graduate departments; parlaying one interview into several others as departments realized this was a "hot" candidate; playing one offer against another, making better and better deals while departments fell over themselves fighting to get the "obvious" stars. One major university sociology department, desperate to improve their standing, tried for four years running to hire in "three big names" to jumpstart their program. Every year, they would announce a search, go after major stars – in the conventional rankings – and find their offers being played as chips in obtaining other offers, squeezing counteroffers from home institutions, and jacking up salaries. In the end, that department was always turned down. Faced with this perpetual failure, they would again go out the next year, and do the same thing all over again. Apart from the organizational obstinacy of such a refusal to learn, the department suffered from the insecure belief that no candidate could be good unless everyone else thought they were good. They would, as one colleague told me, "wait until everyone else thought the guy was hot" before making an offer.

During the same period, they lost an astonishing array of first-rate untenured people, some of whom they would later try to hire back, to no avail.

[5] Or even plausible for entry-level jobs: our last two assistant professor hires were in their forties; one was teaching at a theological seminary, the other working in a law firm. At last report, both are performing wonderfully as undergraduate teachers.

Yes, you may need certain areas – it's hard to fake organic chemistry – but barring such factors, you'll do well to keep an open mind, and a wide open candidate pool, as long as possible. Remember: what do you *really* want?

3) Pour time into personnel decisions.

Hiring matters. Nothing matters so much, or so decisively. Personnel decisions are the most important thing you do. Nothing else even comes close, both positively and negatively. Great hires leverage your own effectiveness: every great teacher you hire doubles your own impact on students (it's not only your teaching, it's the teaching of everyone you've hired); every strong colleague you bring in makes your work and your colleagues' work better. Surrounded by experts, you get accurate answers quickly; surrounded by good teachers, your own teaching improves, as you see how it's done. With easily tenurable colleagues, you don't lose sleep worrying over tenure decisions. With well-networked peers, you gain network contacts. Great teachers attract great students to your major, making your classes more fun. Hardworking younger colleagues organize department events, arrange field trips, remember secretaries' birthdays and energize the entire department. With great teachers in the department, you and your Chair aren't constantly fending off student complaints; with great scholars, your department gains legitimacy in the profession, making the next hire easier; your own work gets to editors a bit more easily; at conventions, your own status goes up, just a little, when people see your nametag and recognize your department. Everything becomes easier when you're surrounded by good people.

And, just as surely, bad hires will torment you forever. During searches, some of us curse the aggravation of reading hundreds of files over their weekend; but if you want true aggravation, try spending 30 years with a bozo in the office next door. If you hire badly, you'll hear complaints from students, and face the embarrassment of knowing you caused the problem. At conferences, colleagues' eyes will drift when they hear whom you've hired. You'll spend endless hours in off-year reviews, evaluations, meetings with the Dean, meetings with the Appointments Committee, and – in the worst cases – meetings with the college attorney. Or if, God forbid, your mistake gets tenure – well, then you're in for 30 years of student complaints,

lousy colloquia, lowered standards, etc., etc. Your precious new curriculum falls flat because of poor execution; your departmental prestige drops through the floor; and on campus, students avoid your classes, and one of those college guidebooks declares that your department "is known as the campus 'gut.'"

All in all, then, it's worth spending a long weekend reading files carefully, and putting in the time picking the right person. Read through the finalists' files multiple times, taking notes, looking for patterns. Read the recommendation letters, all together. Does no one say "Ben is a pleasure to work with?" Do they all mention, in passing, his "shy" or "diffident" manner? Do they praise his "commitment," but never mention his "performance"? Do the work. Don't fade at the end of the process, however tempting it may be. I once heard someone propose, as time ran out, exhaustion set in and tempers began to fray, that with five candidates left in the search the committee should draw names at random and call them in order, with whomever answered first getting the offer. The idea had a certain appeal, but the committee decided to persevere and keep debating. Remember: this is the most important decision your department can make. Lavish it with attention; pour time into it.

Here are five good ways to spend time on a search:

- Make sure the position is attractive. We work with our deans at constructing visiting slots that run for two years, not one, so that we attract stronger candidates; at keeping the defined areas as open as possible; at getting very competitive salaries (our trustees have been extraordinarily helpful there); at having the position approved early enough for us to launch our ads and word-of-mouth efforts at the season's beginning; and so on. We resist using term positions, narrowly defined slots, underfunded adjuncts, and other "warm body" solutions that some administrators seem to favor. Any improvement in the position definition is worth working for.

- Work on generating a large, high-quality pool. We try to interview at our annual convention, even though it's held in August, far before any application deadlines. As chair I usually interviewed 20-30 potential candidates at the meetings, not so much to "make cuts" as to

show the flag, generate a little publicity for our (relatively unknown) school, to discover diamonds in the rough and to eliminate obvious turkeys. Our first contact with a star named Gwen Dordick was as a "well, let's talk to her" candidate at the convention; we were immediately struck by her flamboyant enthusiasm for her work, her passion for research, and a personal intensity that we thought would be very attractive to students. On paper, we wouldn't have given her a second thought; but once the personal contact was made, we decided to look closer. Or Paula Rust, a spectacular find for us back in 1988, didn't even list her expertise in quantitative methods on her vita; coming from a very quantitative department, she saw her skill as modest. Only in a face-to-face interview did we realize that she was a "numbers cruncher," and so offered us more than any other candidate we saw that year.

- Spend time with the files. Once you've got the short list –12-20 people at some universities, or maybe five at others – study the applications, especially any first-hand writings (papers or articles the candidate has written) and the letters of reference. Look for patterns in reference letters; you want to figure out who these people are, what are their real strengths and weaknesses. Candidates themselves won't tell you – often, they can't – and even their mentors may not be clear on it themselves. If you can only bring one candidate to campus, the written record, or spoken conversations with colleagues who know candidates, are that much more important.

For instance: in 1992, Gwen Dordick, mentioned above, applied to us coming from Columbia University, a sociology department in which it was notoriously difficult to complete a Ph.D. In person, Gwen was passionate, enthusiastic, and a little bit chaotic – a sort of unformed bundle of energetic intellect, with only a vaguely defined set of results or future directions. As we studied her letters, we noticed that almost all of her references indicated in various ways, usually quietly or in passing, that they were a bit surprised she'd come that far; that she'd surpassed their expectations; that she wasn't their typical student, etc. They also said she was uncommonly courageous, physically, morally and intellectually; blessed with native intelligence; and totally committed to her work, and to forging her own path in it. The bulk of their remarks were quite positive. But none thought she was a perfect candidate, and in fact there were little hints that they were concerned we might take her as representative of the Columbia product.

That pattern in the letters was intriguing: Gwen always *surprised* them with the quality of her work. And then we read her dissertation chapters, as she sent them to us over the months of her candidacy. Every chapter was better than the one previous, in that short a time. She was noticeably improving, even over the few months of that autumn! Gwen consistently did better than even her mentors thought she would; and she was constantly improving in her work. In a program where some of her teachers seemed unsure about her, she finished at one of the hardest programs in the country. I literally began laughing when I put it all together. She'd be great, I thought, and we'd all be surprised. Her record was clear on this.

We hired her. She was a "project," no doubt, unformed and always experimenting – and eager to learn, and making dramatic strides in her teaching every term. The students loved her total commitment to her work and to theirs, as she chased them down the hallway yelling "You can't write papers like this! Clean it up before you turn it in!," laughing all the while. And at the end of four years at Hamilton, Gwen Dordick – yet again surpassing everyone's expectations, even mine, I confess – left us to take a position at Harvard.

It was all there in her record, for anyone who took the time to read it all and see the pattern.

- Lavish contact on your candidates. We send acknowledgements to every applicant, usually within a few days, telling them our timetable; send a congratulatory letter to those who make the short list, with an update on the process and, again, our schedule; I typically exchange e-mails and phone calls with any number of candidates, short listed and otherwise; our finalists get lots of attention; and, once an offer is made and accepted, we send a "final results" letter to all applicants, with a personal note to all of the short list people and phone calls to the finalists. In years when we run a search, we completely empty our departmental postage budget. I spend considerable time advising "failed" candidates on job search strategies, possible openings at other colleges, vita preparation, how best to prepare for the kinds of positions they want, and so on. We are genuinely grateful to our applicants, and try to let them know it.

This approach, we've found, produces (reasonably!) happy candidates, who then speak well of our department, are truly eager to be considered by us, tell their classmates that Hamilton would be a good place to work, and say nice things to us at professional meetings for years to come. Candidate contact spreads your reputation, for good or ill. For most of our applicants – 300 of them a year – that letter of acknowledgement, and then of rejection, is the only direct contact they will ever have with Hamilton College. We try to make it a positive contact, genuinely appreciative of their situation and sensitive to the anguish of looking for a job.

- Spend time on the final decision – on making it, and on talking it through with all the committee members. Obviously, you need to really think through whom you will hire and why, remembering the essence of "what do we really want." But here I'm referring to hearing out, to the end, the thinking of all the committee members, pro and con, in the details of their thinking. It's important, critically important, for the future of your department – and of the chosen candidate, who must live with anyone disgruntled by the decision – that everyone feels that their concerns, at least, are heard and respected. Even if there's disagreement at the end, it can be respectful disagreement, or at the very least people understand what the nature of the disagreement is. In fairness to your new hire, try to minimize any bad feelings among your colleagues about the decision taken.

4) Don't fall in love with a candidate.

If you do, you'll never see their flaws, or any else's beauty.

I don't mean love in the conventional sense – although that probably happens, too. I mean becoming enthralled with one candidate, typically early in the process, and finding yourself defending that person, extolling her virtues, talking her up. Your emotions take over; you find yourself enthusiastic about *this* person, believing that this is the one great chance. You find yourself a little disturbed when another candidate looks great. All manner of factors can capture your heart: a dazzling convention interview, a charming personality, good looks with lots of eye contact, attending the same high school, or a network of mutual friends. I've seen a fondness for pro football take a candidate to the finalist stage; I've seen being a white Southern

male eliminate a candidate, explicitly. Being nice can be held against someone (as evidence of being "lightweight"); hobbies, clothing, acquaintances, all can count for or against a candidate. And lots of people – *lots* of people – use candidate searches to search not for good professors but for friends, especially those nice untenured friends who will always be available for a lunch date. At its worst, this is an abuse of power.

Emotional involvement is, unfortunately, often encouraged by our hiring processes themselves, most obviously the early "straw poll" in which all the committee members declare publicly who they favor, or how they rank the candidates. This procedure forces members to publicly state a view, which then they (naturally) feel obligated to defend, as cognitive dissonance theory would predict. *A public declaration of support for a candidate can emotionally lock a committee member into defending that candidate.* At this point, you start amassing a case for your candidate, as if you're a lawyer defending a client. You then refuse to see the other candidates' strengths, your person's weaknesses become irrelevant, and the whole decision degenerates into open conflict. We've all been there; it's a natural response to a situation that is virtually structured to produce that conflict. In the end, it's my faction vs. your faction.

Premature commitment to candidates can be avoided. Yes, you need a first cut list; but you needn't rank everyone with "my first choice" listed at the top. You can just have a list of eight or ten, and compare everyone's lists. And retain non-consensus candidates, whom one or two people feel strongly about. The main thing is to keep the process open, and don't let anyone get too strongly wedded to any particular outcome. I usually ask committee members to talk some about candidates they support a lot, and to review that candidate's strengths; but also to profile the strengths of other candidates. The discussion builds around "who is this person, and what are they good at?" rather than rank-order results. The ranking should be the very last thing that's done, not the first. Never say, "Well, Jackie likes McLellan, Dennis like Jones, and the rest of us want Vargas." It may well be true; but stating it this way makes the conflict too salient, I think. You'd do better, again, to review the strengths of each candidate and to discuss what the department really wants, then find the right fit. The outcome, that is, should be based on departmental needs, not the voting strength of various factions.

The key here is to spend effort (1) figuring out what the department really wants, and (2) learning who the candidates really are. Premature commitment is a mistake strategically, since it subordinates departmental goals to conventional thinking; politically, since it needlessly polarizes the department; and substantively, since you wind up with relatively unfamiliar candidates whose records you haven't really studied.

5) Hire for demonstrated strength, not for lack of weakness.

Too often, candidates are eliminated for what they can't do, not hired for what they can do. The winning candidate then is just the survivor of a veto sequence in which weakness in some area, or failure to win support of one committee member, dooms a candidacy. What remains is one pretty good, pleasant person to whom no one objects, and who appears to be good at everything – at least on paper – but great at nothing.

But the major benefit of organizations is that everyone *needn't* be good at everything. The division of labor is a powerful tool when used to maximize each person's contribution. Most modern organizations, especially those driven by performance pressures from their environment, have learned this thoroughly. No army requires that artillery experts also be expert sharpshooters or that a logistics master also be a good cook. The Metropolitan Opera asks that singers sing very well indeed, but it doesn't expect Placido Domingo also to handle ticket sales, or even put together his own costume. The great singers are hardly even expected to feed themselves; but they are required to sing, at a truly high level of proficiency.[6] Other people backstage provide the food.

But some colleges insist on requiring that all their faculty be proficient in multiple unrelated areas. We ask that great teachers also be productive scholars, and that the most dedicated library-loving scholars spend time meeting with assistant deans on faculty governance committees. We expect the great, gifted advisers of undergraduates also to win grants from the National Science Foundation, and when they don't we fire them. It's a terrible waste.

[6] I borrow the example from the late, great, Peter Drucker.

Better to hire for real excellence at something that matters. Perhaps it is skill in the large introductory lecture, where beginning students are grabbed by your subject and shown its excitement. Perhaps you need a prolific and prominent nationally-known scholar, to raise the department's profile, attract strong junior candidates, enhance the college's prestige, and raise the intellectual temperature of your program. Perhaps you need a Chair, who can set out a sharable vision, work well with different people, be fair in evaluations, command resources from the Dean, and craft a program that best delivers to students what they need from their education. Perhaps you need a great seminar teacher who works best with upper-level students, saying little but setting a tone of respect for intellectual work and a love of ideas. In any case, the best strategy is to hire someone who's great at something, then place her where that strength will do the most good. Each person contributes his or her own great strengths.

The standard-issue "balance of teaching, scholarship and service" is, therefore, a serious mismanagement of human resources. It is a recipe for mediocrity, in which outstanding strength matters less than across-the-board plausibility, and in which each individual, rather than the organization as a whole, must include all the needed skills. We lose great teachers who don't publish, and fine scholars who don't want to spend their days with undergraduates. Everyone is forced to work on meaningless committees in order to "get in their service," a waste of time to no good effect. If you're already a strong teacher, you spend your time not in teaching, but in trying to crank out a couple of articles that no one will ever read. After a few years of this approach, everyone on the faculty is spending time, and anxiety, on precisely the tasks for which they are least suited; they are trying to shore up their weaknesses instead of being spectacular successes in their strong areas. Faculty are demoralized, scholarship is mediocre, and teaching becomes – reasonably –an aggravation instead of a joy. And we wind up with a lot of pretty decent people, all pretty decent at pretty much everything, and great at nothing.

Hire a variety of people, each excellent in some important field or task. Respect them all. At the end of a few years, you'll have lots of great people doing things they're great at, and you'll have a great program.

6) Rely on the record.

To judge a candidate's strengths, look at her record. This seems elementary; the problem is remembering to do it. Instead, we are often misled by interviews, by self-assessments, by attitudes, by plans. For instance:

- Many colleges ask for, and take seriously, statements of "teaching philosophy" or "my scholarly plans." Or they will determine a 30-year hire (the time some tenure-track people will be at your school) based on the fine points of a cover letter. That's okay if you're hiring PR writers, or philosophers of education, or grant writers; but lots of people can write beautiful statements about teaching without ever teaching at all, much less being good at it. I've read long, elaborate, even moving statements from colleagues whom I know to be lousy teachers. I've see great syllabi from people who are terrible in the classroom. I've also known marvelous teachers who refused to write anything of the "philosophy" genre, on the grounds that such statements are pompous rhetoric and a waste of time spent away from actually teaching.

If you want a teacher, hire a teacher. If you want a writer, hire a writer.

- Interviews are risky in their own ways. A charming candidate can sweep into a job for which he is totally unsuited – unless charm with strangers is itself part of the job, as with insurance salesmen, politicians, or perhaps university presidents. All of your faculty can love a candidate, enjoy talking with him, find him perfectly wonderful – only to learn later that students find him vacuous, or condescending, or uninterested in the long, slow work of teaching students (for instance) how to write an essay. It's astonishing that we will pick even college deans by how smoothly they answer a few questions in a public forum, largely disregarding decades of actual behavior they have produced.

- In years past, I confess, I've been misled by candidates' expressed "interest in teaching." It was a mistake. Lots of perfectly nice people are interested in teaching, and really want to do it, and have even spent lots of time doing it, without being at all good at it. I *suspect* that being interested in teaching helps one be good at it, but after 30 years of watching college

teachers I have no actual evidence to support this belief. Some very good teachers entered the field grudgingly, and there are a few real disasters who claim to the end that they love it.

So how do you pick your person? *The best predictor of a person's future behavior is their past behavior.* Look at which things they've actually done. That's the only empirical way to gauge how your candidate will perform in the job. All the rest is guesswork, speculation, and prejudice. By the age of 30, the vast majority of us have formed our personalities, and major changes are pretty rare thereafter. A hardworking, productive researcher is fairly likely to continue doing productive work; and helpful colleagues don't just, one day, stop helping. Relatively few great teachers change their entire personality and stop caring about students, stop taking classes seriously, stop doing their work. It happens, yes – and if it does, you should look at your way of handling teachers – but I think it's rare.

If you want to know what the person will do in your job, look at what they've done already in their other jobs. Do top students always admire and respect them? What, in detail, do colleagues' reviews say? Some teachers always draw large numbers of students despite famously tough grading; others regularly win praise for making difficult material exciting. Evidence can come from reference letters, course evaluations, phone conversations, anything. Our task – and we are professional researchers, after all – is to comb that evidence, drawing valid conclusions.

Relying on the record can actually open possibilities. For instance, many departments require "Ph.D. in hand" for candidates, apparently on the grounds that too many people never finish the dissertation otherwise. But (1) this stipulation cuts your pool of candidates dramatically, and abandons the chance to grab a good person before other places will consider him, and (2) it's not necessary. Finishing the Ph.D. is a challenge, no doubt, but it's not a completely unprecedented challenge in any one person's life. People who finish things on time will probably continue to finish things on time. *Look at the record.* Does your candidate have a record of completed tasks – degrees done promptly, MA theses completed on schedule, papers and articles actually presented or published – not just "in progress"? At one point, all of the tenure-track faculty hired in Hamilton's Sociology Department over a 12-year period came to us

"ABD" – and all finished promptly, and published the results. There was little risk involved, since all had strong records of completing work promptly and without pushing. When Gwen Dordick (mentioned earlier) was a candidate at Hamilton in the early 90s, the question "will she finish?" was raised. To answer the question, we look at the record – she had completed college on time, finished her graduate degrees promptly, had a number of papers already out, and was sending us chapters every month or so, each one better than the previous. She had cleared one hurdle after another with no complaints. There was little risk in hiring her, since everything in her record said she would finish promptly. The same has been true for all of our junior hires since, who have exercised tremendous self-discipline in their work. But it was all there before we hired them. When in doubt, *look at the record.*

Conclusion: What do you want?

The hiring strategy proposed here rests on two principles: 1) decide what you really want, and then 2) find a candidate who actually *does* what you want.

Neither practice is easy. Deciding what you want is not a matter of adding more to your Wish List, but instead of subtracting, or synthesizing, from that list down to one or two crucial factors. Relying on conventional standards only guarantees that you'll fight for the conventional candidates, and automatically discard perhaps dozens of candidates who would do marvelously well if only someone would appreciate their talents. Sticking to what you want, though, requires self-discipline and courage. Your discussions of "what we really want" should continue through the final decision – because, in fact, that is what you're deciding: you're deciding, in the most concrete way possible, what your program actually values.

The second principle – finding the right candidate – is mainly a matter of hard work and analysis. You have to look widely, study lots of files, analyze candidate's records carefully, disregard irrelevancies, control your own emotions, and spend lots of time shuttling between what you want and who the candidates are.

But there are great benefits to this approach. Most competitor employers won't be clear about their goal, and so will be easily distracted. In the case of teaching, they will be distracted by scholarship, charm, a Ph. D. in hand, the persuasiveness of a cover letter, the impressiveness of a PowerPoint presentation, and on and on. Many, many don't want to do the hard work required.

In the end, decide on what you truly want, and find someone with a record of great performance at exactly that task. Then make an offer. They'll probably say yes, since you're the only place around that genuinely wants them.