Impact of Women on Search Committees

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on January 3, 2011 - 3:00am

Does the gender split on faculty search committees affect whether male or female candidates are selected?

This question is much debated and sometimes studied in higher education,[1] where the significant gains of women in attaining doctoral degrees have not been matched in female representation among those who hold associate or full professor positions. Research models on the topic are difficult to design because the presence of more women on search panels can be difficult to isolate as a factor, since departments that place more women on search committees may have more women in the department (which could be a factor in attracting more women) or may place a high value on being welcoming to women (also a potential factor in attracting more women).

Two researchers in Spain, however, have recently completed a study that is based on a four-year period in that country in which all academic promotions and senior-level hiring were decided on the basis of nationwide competitions in which search committees were created by random assignment among qualified faculty members. The results[2] -- published in Vox -- suggest that the impact of having a woman on a hiring or promotion committee is significant for full professor jobs, but not associate positions. Several European countries have instituted quotas on search and promotion committees at universities -- and the authors suggest this approach may be only partly effective.

In Spain, as in other European nations and in the United States, women have achieved parity in doctoral degree attainment -- going in the last 20 years from earning 36 percent to 49 percent of Ph.D.s awarded. The ranks of women have increased -- but not to parity -- among associate professors (from 30 to 39 percent) and full professors (from 11 percent to 18 percent).

For their research, Manuel F. Bagues and Natalia Zinovyeva, scholars at Universidad Carlos III and the Foundation for Applied Economics Research, respectively, examined 35,000 candidacies for associate and full professor positions, in which a total of 7,000 evaluators served on panels. They used measures of research productivity to adjust comparisons so that male and female candidates of roughly equal promise were being compared. The panels, not surprisingly, included some that were all male and others that had various degrees of female participation. While the analysis did not find an impact on associate professor panels, it found that for every additional woman on a seven-member panel reviewing a promotion or hire at the full professor level, the chances of success by a female candidate increased by 14 percent.
Based on these results, the authors suggest that gender quotas for search committees should be evaluated for their impact both on female candidates and female search committee members. Since relatively few women are in the full professor ranks, any effort to have equal gender splits on search committees would impose much more of a time burden on women than on men — limiting the ability of the women to push ahead their research to advance their careers. Given that the presence of women isn't shown to have an impact on associate professor hires, the authors recommend that attention to the gender make-up of committees receive more attention for full professor searches.

Via e-mail, Bagues and Zinovyeva said that they couldn't do a similar analysis on academic jobs in the United States because search committees are not randomly created. But they said they suspected that their findings "may apply also to the other side of the Atlantic for at least two reasons." One is that in the United States, as in Spain, the representation of women falls both from new Ph.D.s to associate professors and from associate professors to full professors.

The other reason is that many American academics believe that gender make-up of committees matters. "American universities often encourage women to sit on promotion committees, perhaps as a way to address the lack of women in academia," they said.

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