December 17, 2004

What We Waste When Faculty Hiring Goes Wrong

By KEVIN J.H. DETTMAR

Once again, the academic hiring season is upon us. In colleges and universities across the land, attention has shifted from major-league baseball to the Modern Language Association job list and similar compilations in other disciplines. Hiring committees again this year will have embarked on the process with high hopes; but we'll doubtless get it wrong, albeit with the best of intentions -- sometimes making professional decisions on (unconfessed or unrecognized) narrowly personal grounds and sometimes unaccountably picking the right guy or gal for all the wrong reasons.

In the 15 years since my first tenure-track job interviews, I have played nearly all the roles involved in the hiring process: a graduate-student candidate, a Ph.D. moving from a term to a tenure-track position, a tenure-track assistant professor looking for greener pastures, and a tenured professor moving from one job to another. I've been a search-committee member and chairman, a department chairman, and an associate dean.

From those various vantage points I've witnessed firsthand many of the ways that the process goes awry. There may be a few novel wrinkles, but I'm inclined to believe, to paraphrase Elvis Costello, that in faculty hiring there's no such thing as an original sin. My experience is in the humanities, but I have seen no evidence that things are much different in the sciences, other than hiring schedules and the substance of disciplinary quarrels. Here are my predictions for how academe will handle hiring this year:

- In many cases we will never even leave the gate. Departments' requests for university administrators for faculty positions to replace colleagues lost to retirement, recruitment, and tenure denial will in turn be denied by cash-strapped central administrators. In the "good old days," departments could rely on a replacement position for each one lost and might occasionally even add a faculty member or two if circumstances seemed to warrant it. More recently, however, whenever two or three department chairmen are gathered together, they talk about the attrition in faculty positions. Many feel lucky if they can replace two of every three they lose.

Too often, even when permission to hire is granted, it will come too late. When a department advertises late in the season, some
people involved in the process argue that the search has been
compromised, because the best candidates will have already
invested their hearts and souls elsewhere. Arguably, garnering
only 125 instead of 150 applications for a position is hardly
crippling, but the perception that we might be "settling" for less
than the best can haunt a new colleague, and a department, for
years.

- **We will struggle over the definition of any faculty position for which we are recruiting.** In my
  own department last year we successfully hired an expert in early-American literature to fill the
gap in our curriculum and intellectual profile left when a distinguished senior colleague in that
same field retired the year before. Often, however, replacing a departing colleague with
another of the same stripe -- what Cary Nelson has dubbed the "replacement model" of hiring --
is not what the doctors should be ordering.

The scholarly contours of a department shift over time, with the
interests of its current members, new directions in the field, and
the interests and passions of undergraduate and graduate
students. New hiring needs to respond to those shifts. But if the
department attempts to replace Professor X, a specialist in, say,
structural linguistics, with another of his same species -- through
tradition or simply a failure of courage or imagination -- the
department will have a hard time responding to its changing
mission in a changing field. The department will be all the more
constrained if it has shrunk by 10, 15, or even 20 percent since
Professor X's hiring -- and such withering has been common
during the past decade, especially at public institutions.

- **We will choose our new colleagues by committee, as we ought, but those choices will bear the
  marks of decision-by-committee.** We'll choose the best candidate for the position that
everyone involved can agree on. In some cases, that procedure will favor the genial but safe
candidate, promoting the (imagined) "good colleague" over the "distinguished scholar."

It would be unjust to call such appointments a compromise, since
a tenure-track position in any reputable humanities department
in the country will garner more outstanding résumés than you
can shake a stick at. Indeed, one of the more uncomfortable
consequences of the depressed job market in the humanities over
the past two decades is that search-committee members, and
even committee chairmen, often lack the scholarly credentials of
the candidates they are interviewing, and rejecting, for entry-level
jobs. But too often, committees will fail to make their offer to the
best-qualified candidate from a frighteningly accomplished and
competitive pool of applicants.

Some years ago a close friend of mine was informally offered his
first tenure-track job, in one of the nation's finest English
departments, when the senior professor in his field told him at
the conclusion of the Modern Language Association's
convention: "We've now spoken to all the most promising young
scholars in the country on the market this year, and you're clearly
the best." This department was confident that it had identified
that year's young star, and it hired him. It sounds simple, but the
process rarely works that way. For all but the handful of best
departments in the country, several extraneous factors too often
prevent us from accomplishing what we've set out to do. Among
them are the fear that the "best person" won't come, or won't
stay: She's too good for us, we fear, and rather than let her tell us
so (by accepting another position, or leaving us later for another),
we'll not ask her. Far too often, in my experience, when we say
"the best person," we really mean "the best person who we're
confident will come and stay."

Hiring the best person always involves the risk that he or she will
leave at some point, and having colleagues leave for better jobs is
evidence that a department has hired well. In any given year,
Harvard might hire the best Shakespearean on the market, only
to have her leave for Duke five years later. Yale may make an
offer to the season's hot young literary theorist, only to have him
turn them down for a job at Wisconsin. Yet they risk it.

In a case closer to home, four years ago we persuaded the most
promising young scholar in her field (in my judgment) to come
to here to Southern Illinois; but starting this fall she has left us to
teach at the University of Missouri -- without a doubt a better
position for her. I'm personally disappointed to lose such a smart
and energetic colleague, but professionally proud to have picked
her from a crowded field of applicants and to have persuaded her
to come here. We did well to hire her, and our department is the
richer for her time here.

- We will on occasion be used by a midcareer or senior professor who has no real interest in
joining our department, but who requires our expression of interest to improve his position at
his home institution. It's deeply embarrassing to find out that the cute guy went to the dance
with you only so that his partner would see the two of you there together and be jealous. At the
same time, it is a tenacious fact of most university salary systems that an outside offer is just
about the only leverage a faculty member has to improve his salary. I'll leave it to Ms. Mentor
or The New York Times ethicist to parse the moral implications of such duplicitous job
searches. Without contradicting my previous observations, it's safe to say that often these
applications in search of a counteroffer can be detected by a search committee not susceptible
to the applicant's flattery. My department's a good one, but if Harold Bloom applied for a job
here, we'd be right to be suspicious.

- We will allow our internal squabbles to interfere in the process of strengthening our faculty.
In deeply ideologically divided departments, faculty searches can be difficult to navigate
successfully. If a search committee is perceived to be composed of faculty members of only one
ideological stripe, be it "conservative" or "liberal," the results of that committee's deliberations
are liable to be viewed with suspicion, if not outright contempt, by members of the other camp.
On the other hand, if a department chairman attempts to constitute a "balanced" committee
with representatives of each warring faction, the result can be gridlock, and the consequences
dire for the job candidate.

I will never forget one especially traumatic early interview I
endured as a candidate for a very desirable position in an Ivy League department. The interviewers in the hotel suite at the MLA convention were an Eminent Professor in My Field, a Rather Less Famous Professor in My Field, and the completely silent, though smiling, department chairman, a scholar entirely outside my field. My own intellectual disposition was much closer to that of the Eminent Professor than to the Rather Less Famous Professor; but because of the profound disagreement between the two of them, any answer that pleased one was sure to anger the other. The experience is best captured in a phrase used by a friend to describe a similar encounter of his own: "I felt like they were there to play handball. And I was the wall."

There are many other reasons that faculty searches fail. Members of a department may feel threatened by the addition of a genuinely talented and ambitious young faculty member (someone who will "raise the bar"), fearing, whether consciously or subconsciously, that the candidate’s productivity will make them look bad. Or the complicated set of circumstances and negotiations surrounding spousal or partner hires may result in gridlock. I even know of a case where the clear-cut top candidate for a job was passed over because her name was too similar to that of an already tenured member of the department.

These and other problems make for great stories, and the novelists Richard Russo, David Lodge, Jane Smiley, and others have written them. But the darker side of faculty hiring is that we waste enormous economic, administrative, emotional, and interpersonal resources in the process of finding new colleagues. My rough calculations suggest that when one factors in the cost of advertising a position; of the time spent by search-committee members, support staff, and college and university administrators in reviewing letters of application, curricula vitae, letters of recommendation, and writing samples; of sending the search committee to a national conference for initial screening; and of bringing finalists to the campus for interviews, the price of conducting a tenure-track search is about the same as the first-year salary of that new faculty member (at least in the humanities).

Despite that significant expenditure of human and economic capital, most academics have received no formal training in how to conduct a faculty search. Given that (as one wag said) at any one time half the professoriate is out trying to hire the other half, it's shocking that we spend so little time or money learning how to do it well. No corporation would allow such waste. Ph.D. graduates of
my alma mater spent an average of 7.3 years, during my era, mastering the tools of literary and cultural research; but in the 15 years since leaving, even in my role as associate dean and department chairman, I have spent -- are you ready? -- not one hour of formal training in the best practices for hiring in academe.

In English studies, our best professional resource is the Association of Departments of English, an organization for departmental administrators affiliated with the MLA. The ADE's most important contributions to administrative best practices include the summer seminars it holds for department chairmen and directors of graduate study, which I was fortunate to attend when I led a department. But although hiring was certainly a topic of conversation at those seminars, no working session was dedicated to the topic during the years I attended.

The ADE provides invaluable support to English and foreign-language departmental administrators, and I don't mean to lay this problem at its door; its membership is diverse, and its charge is broad. But neither is this lack of training addressed elsewhere. The MLA, which publishes the primary listing of openings in English and foreign-language departments, has for as long as I can remember published a list of "Dos and Don'ts for Interviewers" in the print copy of the MLA job list. But any search committee that needs to be told to "listen attentively" to the job candidate and not to "display boredom" or "doodle" arguably has bigger problems than any I'm concerned with here. As graduate-student job seekers, my friends and I were never sure whether to be insulted or amused by the list's advice for job candidates: Do "come on time and follow all the usual protocols of politeness"; don't "argue with the interviewer" or "overstay your welcome."

It's time for the academy, at its highest levels, to deal honestly and practically with this problem. It's not just scarce institutional resources that we waste when we hire badly, as important as that problem is. Every search to fill an academic position, especially at the entry level, puts at least a handful of vulnerable people through a long, demanding, and often demoralizing process. The professoriate is to some extent what Stephen Dedalus (in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man) called Ireland: the old sow that eats her farrow. One of my colleagues in graduate school, having persevered until the very end of a long search and been invited to the campus for a three-day visit, returned home and heard nothing from the hiring department for six weeks. When she finally screwed up her courage and phoned the department...
chairman, she was curtly told by the department secretary that the position had gone to another. Those we damage today in our inept searches will, if they somehow survive and enter the academy, almost certainly go on to damage the next generation in their turn.

The problem might be addressed discipline by discipline. In my own, the Association of Departments of English, in its summer seminars, and the Modern Language Association, at its annual convention, might sponsor roundtables and workshops on best hiring practices; the MLA might convene a committee to investigate the search process -- problems and solutions -- and publish findings along the lines of its recent report from the Committee on Professional Employment. The offices of university provosts should sponsor training in the fall for all department search committees that will be charged with hiring in the coming year. That training needs to include clear instruction on the institution's goals and guidelines for achieving a diverse faculty. The problem might also be handled at an even higher level, by the American Association of University Professors. Ideally, of course, real reform of faculty hiring needs to be coordinated among all those interested parties.

It's worth remembering that in hiring new faculty members to join our departments, we ask ourselves and our colleagues to do a difficult thing: identify and hire scholars and teachers who will make the rest of us look bad.

Here the lines from Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" are relevant:

But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.

Our junior colleagues on the one hand represent the hope that springs eternal: Their energy and promise can potentially enhance our departments, our institutions, our disciplines. But they also drive time's winged chariot: The famous Negro League pitcher Satchel Paige advised, "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you," and the new colleagues we work so hard to find and woo are precisely that which is gaining on us, pushing us one step closer to those "deserts of vast eternity."

Hiring well, then, fundamentally contradicts human nature: Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that it so often goes wrong, but rather that we ever get it right. According to a saying current in Silicon Valley, "The A-Team hires the A-Team; the B-Team hires the C-Team." If we are to get it right more often than we currently
do, we're going to have to put our heads together and become smarter and better than any one of us is on our own.

Kevin J.H. Dettmar is a professor of English at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.


Copyright 2013. All rights reserved.
The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037