



Best Practices for Conducting Faculty Searches

Unconscious Bias and its Influence on Decision Making

What is Unconscious Bias?

An enormous body of literature confirms that we all have biases—some explicit, many implicit. These biases have an effect on how we view others and how we make decisions, including decisions about faculty hiring. Perhaps most disturbing, implicit biases can be at odds with our own conceptions of ourselves and our conscious values and standards. You may believe yourself to be open-minded and you may be determined to select the most meritorious candidate before you. But a good deal of evidence from the behavioral sciences—some of it conducted on university professors themselves—demonstrates that actual achievements are often set aside in favor of those who fit some group stereotype of those likely to succeed.

Recognize Your Own Unconscious Biases

Acknowledging and understanding your biases and those of your colleagues can minimize the influence they have on the search. Spending sufficient time on evaluation can also reduce the influence of assumptions that may not be warranted.

Harvard Professor Mahzarin Banaji, Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics in the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, is a leading authority on unconscious bias and its effects on decision making. Search committee members are encouraged to read her recent book: Banaji, MR & Greenwald, AG (2013) *Blind Spot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Delacorte Press). It's a great read and will change your view of the world.

Take an Implicit Association Test (IAT)

Professor Banaji and colleagues have developed an online set of tasks designed to assess associations between personal attributes (e.g., gender, race, or sexual orientation) and your positive or negative views about them. Project Implicit, hosted at Harvard, includes dozens of IATs that allow you—in the privacy of your office or home—to explore your implicit biases.

We strongly encourage every search committee member to take at least one IAT.

(Registration is free, and the first test takes no more than 15 minutes.) The tests are not meant to challenge your conscious attitudes, but to reveal the extent to which you may nevertheless associate groups like “female” with “family” and “male” with “career.” As members of this intellectual community, you will surely find it of some interest to discover that your mind contains associations of which you are unaware. You can find the IATs at implicit.harvard.edu.

Beware of How Unconscious Bias Can Affect Candidate Evaluations

Search committee members often give preference to applicants they know, whose advisors or mentors they know, or who hold a degree from their own alma mater or one of a small number of elite institutions.

- Women, minorities, and candidates from institutions other than traditional peers can be held to higher standards. Search committee members may scrutinize their records in an unconsciously dismissive way, evaluate the same achievements as others to be less important, and fail to notice unexpected achievements.
- Search committee members—and sometimes letter writers—can inadvertently, or even overtly, minimize the contributions by women and minorities, and may unfairly attribute success to mentors and collaborators. It can be helpful to explicitly ask and discuss—as a committee—if a letter writer is unduly shaping a view of a candidate in a positive or negative direction based on scant or unreliable evidence.
- Letters of recommendations often reflect stereotypic views of demographic groups. A man’s research will be described as seminal. A woman will be described as warm and collaborative. These implicit cues can influence decision-making.
- Be especially vigilant about statements concerning “fit.” This euphemism is often used to exclude individuals whose demographic characteristics don’t match the demographics of the department or field. If “fit” were the best driver of decision making, the Harvard of today would be identical to the Harvard of the past.
- Another concept to scrutinize is “potential.” Since decisions about early career stage scholars often depend upon predictions about potential, superficial qualities such as dress or style of speech should not color assessments of actual achievements.
- For women especially, it is important to not let the concept of family commitments enter the evaluation. Here are some excerpts from recent letters of recommendation: “She balances work and life in a way that detracts from her career.” “And what’s more remarkable is that she did all of this while having three children.” [NOTE: the same person who wrote this last sentence also wrote a letter for the candidate’s husband and did not mention the three children, although they were indeed his too.]
- Recent studies document that the achievements of women and minorities tend to be evaluated less positively than white men of equal accomplishment. Ask yourself whether you unconsciously read the dossiers of candidates differently? You will be impressed with your own ability to correct your assumptions once you become aware of their contaminating influence.

Guide to Acceptable Interview Questions

It is essential for all members of a search committee to be aware of these guidelines and follow them in both spirit and letter. Avoid any direct or indirect questions that touch on material that may not be asked. This information about an applicant should never be discussed with regard to his or her candidacy for a position.

Subject	What May Be Asked	What May NOT Be Asked
Name	Whether the applicant has worked for the University under another name. Whether any other information, such as a nickname or initials, is needed to check the candidate's work and educational record.	Maiden name of a married woman. Inquiries about the name that would seek to elicit information about the candidate's ancestry or descent.
Age	Discussion should be kept to questions about the applicant's career stage.	Inquiry into the date of birth or age of an applicant.
Gender	No questions.	Inquiry into an applicant's maiden name or any question that pertains to only one sex.
Sexual Orientation	No questions.	Inquiry into applicant's sexuality.
Religion	No questions, except in extremely rare and narrow circumstances where religious beliefs and practices could be a <i>bona fide</i> occupational qualification for a position, with the employer bearing a heavy burden to show that this is so.	Inquiry into an applicant's religious denomination, affiliation, church, parish, pastor, or religious holidays observed. Avoid any questions regarding organizations and/or affiliations that would identify religion.
Birthplace	No questions.	Birthplace of applicant or of applicant's parents, partner/significant other, or other close relatives.
Relatives	Names of applicant's relatives already employed by Harvard.	Names, addresses, ages, number, or other information concerning applicant's children or other relatives not employed by Harvard.
National Origin	An employer may require an employee to produce documentation that evidences his or her identity and employment eligibility under federal immigration laws.	Inquiry into the applicant's lineage, ancestry, national origin, descent, parentage, or nationality; nationality of parents or partner/significant other; applicant's native language.
Citizenship	Are you legally authorized to work in the United States?	Inquiries about citizenship or whether the applicant intends to become a U.S. citizen.
Language	What languages do you read fluently? Write fluently? Speak fluently?	Inquiries into how applicant acquired the ability to read, write, or speak a foreign language.
Education	Inquiry into the academic, vocational, or professional education of an applicant for employment.	Questions about education designed to determine how old the applicant is.
Experience	Inquiry into work experience. Inquiry into countries the applicant has visited. Inquiry into references.	Inquiry into organizations of which the applicant for employment is a member, the nature, name or character of which would likely disclose the applicant's protected class status.

Subject	What May Be Asked	What May NOT Be Asked
Disability	You can ask an applicant about his or her ability to perform job-related functions, as long as the questions are not phrased in terms which would elicit whether the applicant has a disability, and as long as such questions are asked of all applicants similarly situated (such as in all interviews).	Inquiry into whether the applicant has a physical or mental disability/handicap or about the nature or severity of the disability/handicap. Inquiry into whether an applicant has ever been addicted to illegal drugs or treated for drug abuse/alcoholism. Inquiry into whether an applicant has AIDS. Inquiry into whether an applicant has ever received workers' compensation. Inquiry into whether an applicant has ever been hospitalized/treated for medical or mental health conditions. Inquiry into whether an applicant has ever been absent from work due to illness. An employer may not inquire as to the nature, severity, treatment, or prognosis of an obvious handicap or disability or of a hidden disability or handicap voluntarily disclosed by an applicant.
Marital Status	No questions.	Are you married? Where does your partner/significant other work? Is there a partner/significant other who would also need to find a job in the area? What are the ages of your children, if any? What was your maiden name?
Address	Applicant's place of residence.	Do you rent or own your home? How long at each particular address?
Height, Weight, Strength	Questions regarding height, weight, or strength may be asked only if the employer can prove these requirements are necessary to do the job.	n/a
Photograph	No questions.	An employer cannot ask for a photograph to accompany an application.
Military	Applicant's work experience, including names, addresses of previous employers, dates of employment, reasons for leaving.	Inquiry into an applicant's type of discharge.
Criminal Record	Inquiry into actual felony convictions (not arrests) that relate reasonably to fitness to perform a particular job.	Inquiry relating to arrests or misdemeanors. Any inquiry or check into a person's arrest, court, or conviction record if not substantially related to functions and responsibilities of the prospective employment.
Memberships	Are you a member of any professional societies or organizations? (Exclude inquiries into specific organizations the name or character of which indicates the race, creed, color, or national origin of its members.)	Inquiry into applicant's membership in nonprofessional organizations (e.g., clubs, lodges, etc.)

Acknowledgements: Harvard Office of Human Resources, MIT Faculty Search Committee Handbook (2002).

Sample Candidate Evaluation Sheet

This evaluation sheet is offered as a general template; search committees should feel free to modify this for their own purposes. These questions are designed for assistant/associate professor faculty searches; committees may want to modify some of the language used for non-ladder and tenured faculty searches.

Candidate's Name:

Please indicate which of the following are true for you (check all that apply):

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read candidate's CV | <input type="checkbox"/> Met with candidate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read candidate's scholarship | <input type="checkbox"/> Attended meal with candidate |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Read candidate's letters of recommendation | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Attended candidate's job talk | |

Please comment on the candidate's scholarship (noting the basis of your assessment):

Please comment on the candidate's teaching ability (noting the basis of your assessment):

Please rate the candidate on each of the following:

	Excellent	Good	Neutral	Fair	Poor	Unable to judge
Potential for (Evidence of) scholarly impact						
Potential for (Evidence of) research productivity						
Potential for (Evidence of) research funding						
Potential for (Evidence of) collaboration						
Relationship to the department's priorities						
Ability to make a positive contribution to department's climate						
Potential (Demonstrated ability) to attract and supervise graduate students						
Potential (Demonstrated ability) to teach and supervise undergraduates						
Potential (Demonstrated ability) to attract, work with and teach diverse students						
Potential (Demonstrated ability) to be a conscientious department/School community member						

Adapted from materials developed by the STRIDE Committee at the University of Michigan.