

**Northwestern University**

*The Quest for Excellence*

*Reflections on the Faculty Search  
Process*

Suggestions for Department Chairs,  
Department Personnel Committees,  
and ad hoc Search Committees

Office of the Provost  
2004

No other single activity will so fundamentally shape the future of Northwestern University as our success in recruiting to our faculty the very best scholar/teachers, men and women who are or who will become widely recognized as leaders in their fields.

During the coming years we will see an extraordinary level of faculty hiring at Northwestern. Some of this activity will be part of the continuing activity to fill vacancies created by unexpected departures. Other searches will be occasioned by the planned growth in the faculty made possible by Campaign Northwestern. Still other searches will be necessitated by the retirement of faculty. Currently, 43 percent of all tenured faculty were born before 1945. Their replacement over the coming years will be a great challenge.

Department and program faculty members—and the search committees on which they serve—will play a critical role in ensuring the future strength of our University through the vigor they devote to the search process, and the high standards they bring to the selection of future colleagues. As we embark on an ambitious effort to improve further our University through strengthening and diversifying the faculty, we rely upon the energetic cooperation of all members of the community who participate in the search process. This document is designed to assist in this process.

## **Recognize that there is competition for the very best and the role of the search committee as a University representative**

Northwestern's ambitions in faculty hiring are very high. The persons sought by Northwestern are likely to be sought by other first-rate institutions as well. These prospective faculty colleagues should be treated with great respect. The way in which these scholars are treated will affect their future sense of Northwestern—even if they do not receive, or if they decline, an offer. It is essential that search committees recognize the important public relations implications of their interactions with prospects.

- ***Think of persons as prospects, whom we want to court, rather than candidates, whom we allow to apply.***
- ***Especially in senior searches, ask prospects whether they would “allow us to consider them”—not whether they are willing to “apply.”***

Persons contacted in connection with the search process will form lasting impressions of the department and the University as a result of their interactions. By dealing with prospects warmly, efficiently, and professionally, the search committee has an opportunity to enhance the reputation and image of Northwestern. On the other hand, inattention to prospects is likely to damage the University's reputation. In either case, the prospects' experiences with the search committee and the University are likely to be shared with their colleagues—thus multiplying the positive or negative public relations impact. The courtship of a prospect, even if unsuccessful, can be a victory of sorts for the department and the University if that person carries away (and shares) a positive impression. It is not inconceivable that a person considered for but not offered a position in one search will, some years later, be a person Northwestern is actively wooing.

- ***Work closely with departmental support staff to ensure that applications and nominations are acknowledged promptly and cordially, that applicants/prospects are apprised of the projected timetable of the search, and***

***that all correspondence between the department/search committee reflects appreciation of the prospect's interest in Northwestern. Take steps to ensure that every prospect has a positive impression of the department and the University following the search.***

- ***Prepare carefully for campus visits by prospects. By offering campus tours, appropriate hospitality, congenial venues for presentations by prospects, etc., ensure that prospects believe they have been courted as well as scrutinized for a position at Northwestern.***

## Take Affirmative Action

The creation of a broad and diverse pool of prospects is an essential first step in the faculty search process. Members of search committees should understand that affirmative action is not a perfunctory process or bureaucratic requirement to be undertaken mechanically. Instead, it is part of Northwestern University's commitment to take deliberate and affirmative steps to identify and recruit to its faculty women and underrepresented minorities. Affirmative action implies that diverse people may possess diverse strengths and that we must be aggressive in identifying and assessing such strengths. The Northwestern community is richer as a result of the diversity of skills, interests, talents, and backgrounds brought to the University by students, faculty, and staff. The excellence of our faculty is in some measure a function of the various experiences and perspective scholars bring to our community and the creative debate that diversity in backgrounds makes possible. Our commitment to affirmative action in faculty hiring presumes that special efforts are justified—and often required—to ensure that that diversity is maintained and enhanced.

- ***In conducting a search, be aware of every possible opportunity to fill the position—or other positions—with women and/or under-represented minorities identified through the search process.***
- ***While seeking the help of Northwestern colleagues and scholars at other institutions in identifying potential prospects for a position, include specific inquiries regarding promising female and minority scholars—including those who might be available a year or two hence.***
- ***In order to reach the broadest possible applicant pool, go beyond the standard publicity media and explore the possibility of using journals and other publications that might reach various readerships.***
- ***Consult directories of recent female and minority recipients of terminal degrees in the field and ask promising prospects to send materials so that Northwestern could consider them.***
- ***Ensure that every reasonable step is taken to include female and minority prospects in the applicant pool and provide opportunities for leading female and minority prospects to meet with and be interviewed by search committee.***

Capitalize on Northwestern's comparative advantages

In some measure, a faculty search is a marketing enterprise. The University seeks to find the very best scholars to fill open positions. But identifying those men and women is an empty exercise if one cannot close the search successfully – persuading the person who emerges as the first choice to accept the position. Quality must always be the primary consideration in searches. But, by focussing on Northwestern’s comparative advantages and targeting prospective colleagues who might find a position at Northwestern especially attractive, search committees can help maximize the probability that the top prospect will accept.

- ***Target prospects who might find that Northwestern offers special opportunities to have impact on their fields. The likelihood of a successful recruitment is significantly enhanced if the prospect can see that our institutional priorities coincide with his/her own and that he/she can have real impact here.***
- ***Build on Northwestern’s distinctive tradition of interdisciplinary education and research. Consider possibilities for joint appointments, within or across schools.***
- ***In senior searches, consider targeting scholars at institutions that do not offer some of the advantages Northwestern offers, such as location in a major urban area, existence of strong interdisciplinary programs, or access to graduate students. Consider approaching distinguished faculty members at first-rate undergraduate teaching colleges or at first-rate research universities in rural locations.***
- ***Especially for senior positions, searches should be truly international. Overseas scholars may find the academic opportunities, facilities, quality of life, and compensation at an institution like Northwestern to be attractive.***

Enlist the support of the dean’s office—and permit the dean to enlist the support of the Provost’s Office—to seize special opportunities

Searches are authorized on the basis of school hiring plans, which are approved annually, based upon known or anticipated vacancies in faculty lines as well as available resources. Occasionally, an unexpected opportunity arises to recruit a outstanding scholar/teacher to the faculty. Inevitably, resource constraints (including not only salary but also space and startup funds) will prevent us from seizing some such opportunities. In cases when a search is to be redefined and re-opened, exceptionally high standards must be met. But faculty members and department chairs should not pre-judge whether or not special opportunities can be seized.

- ***Bring to the attention of the school dean opportunities that may not have been envisioned when a search was initiated -- especially when the prospective appointment might address such school and University priorities as the building of particular disciplines, the encouragement of cross-school and interdisciplinary collaboration, and the hiring of women and under-represented minorities.***

## Take a long view

The replenishment of the faculty is a continuing enterprise. Though the pressures are real to fill current vacancies immediately, schools and departmental personnel committees are encouraged to take a multi-year view of faculty hiring. In the context of a multi-year hiring strategy, schools and departments may choose to adopt different approaches than they might use if vacancies were being filled serially, year by year.

- ***Should there be multiple vacancies over several years, discussion with the school dean might suggest conducting a single “cluster” search, in which multiple persons would be recruited simultaneously—thereby possibly enhancing the likelihood that any one of those persons might accept.***
- ***Where multiple vacancies in a sub-field can be anticipated over a few years, with one of the positions to be a senior position, consider hiring the senior figure first. An additional attraction of the position to that senior scholar might be the prospect of playing a central role in filling other, junior positions.***
- ***Consider using visiting positions as part of a multi-year recruitment strategy. A scholar who has had a fruitful experience at Northwestern as a visiting faculty member may be more inclined to accept a continuing appointment than a person who has not had this experience.***
- ***Compile a running list of promising prospects—people who are at the very forefront of their fields—even though no position may be immediately open. The list could include persons who have published exciting articles and/or books, persons who have made especially stimulating presentations at meetings—even persons who have been wooed by the University, who made a highly positive impression and were offered a position at Northwestern earlier, and who choose to accept a post at another institution.***

## Be proactive

Extraordinarily promising graduate students and scholars who are leaders in their fields are highly sought after. For personal or professional reasons, some may seek out a position at Northwestern. But many such prospective colleagues will not take the initiative to approach us regarding a possible opening. To capture the very best, search committees must be proactive in identifying and then wooing outstanding men and women who might otherwise not find their way into the prospect pool for a search.

- ***Especially in cases where a department has multiple junior positions to fill and where a handful of institutions are recognized as the leading producers of PhDs in the field, consider a recruiting trip to those institutions to identify and cultivate for Northwestern exceptional graduate students who will be on the market in future years. Such cultivation might also help the department identify promising junior faculty prospects early enough to allow an offer to be made prior to the traditional hiring season. Such pre-emptive hiring would of course require that the positions be properly advertised and that other***

***affirmative action steps be undertaken according to an earlier-than-usual calendar.***

- ***Identify and contact advanced graduate students who have received competitive national awards for dissertation research or post-doctoral research, and scholars who have received prizes and awards from professional associations for outstanding research/publication; lists of prize/award recipients are generally available on the websites of the sponsoring organizations.***
- ***Consider reconsidering outstanding scholars who were offered positions at Northwestern earlier and chose to go elsewhere. We know these people. They know us. And it may be that they have become disappointed with their current positions.***

## **Showcase Northwestern University and its environment**

Many factors figure in a scholar's decision to allow him/herself to be considered for—and then to accept—an academic position. Some of them are narrowly professional (e.g., the quality of faculty colleagues and graduate students in the department, library and laboratory resources, etc.) Other considerations may include larger campus issues. Still others relate to personal issues—cultural resources in the area, opportunities for spousal employment, housing, etc. Search committees should be sensitive to the multiple considerations prospective colleagues will be weighing and should highlight the multiple opportunities provided by Northwestern.

- ***Ensure that the department's website is robust and current in content. Prospective faculty members doubtless look at the website early in their consideration of Northwestern. Detailed information regarding faculty research activity is especially helpful.***
- ***Bring prospective faculty to campus for seminars, symposia, etc., where the intellectual activity of the department is highlighted.***
- ***Send or present prospects with materials about the department, the University, and the area. Consider including such items as: the University's strategic plan, "The Highest Order of Excellence;" copies of the Northwestern Observer; the annual report of the Vice President for Research; the "Friday" section of the Chicago Tribune; the Evanston Review; material from the Evanston or Chicago Convention/Visitors Bureaus; Chicago magazine, etc.***
- ***During campus visits by prospective faculty members, enlist the participation not only of department/program members but also of senior faculty members in cognate fields.***
- ***Make efforts to ensure that, during a campus visit, prospects have significant contact with both undergraduate and graduate students in the field.***

- ***Enlist the assistance of the dean's office early on if a promising prospect indicates a disinclination to participate in a search because of concerns such as spousal employment, housing, etc.***

## Accept No Compromises

A faculty search is a laborious undertaking. Having examined the CVs and work of numerous prospects, having hosted several prospects on campus, etc., a committee is understandably eager to recommend a hire. But the implications of such a recommendation are great—not only for the future academic quality of the program but also for the financial commitment represented by a faculty appointment. It is essential that search committees measure prospects by the very highest standards and recommend an appointment only when they are confident that the very best available person in the field has been found. A recommendation to continue or reopen a search is far preferable to a recommendation to fill a position with someone who falls short of the highest standards.

- ***Recognize that there is no shame in concluding that a search has been unsuccessful. Recommend an appointment only when it is clear that the very best available person has been identified.***