

Best Practices
Academic Search Process
College of Veterinary Medicine
September 2012

Forming the Search Committee

Search committee membership, as well as the chair of the committee, is assigned by the Department Chair with approval by the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. It is unusual for a department chair to serve as search committee chair, however, under some circumstances this occurs. The search committee is most often comprised of 5 to 8 members and should include at least one member from outside the department, one member from outside of the College, and one member who is a representative for Affirmative Action. The latter will be someone appointed by the Department Chair to serve in this role. The individual may be a member of the Faculty Affirmative Action Committee, but this is not required. When the Affirmative Action representative on the search committee is not a member of the AA Committee, they should contact that committee for guidance on their role, if needed.

Members of search committees can hold any faculty title. If the position being filled is a replacement for a retiring faculty member, the retiree does not serve on the search committee.

When we search for a department chair or other senior level appointment, the composition of the committee will include a department chair from a different department and stronger representation from outside the department and college. Perhaps half the committee or more will be from outside the department and the search committee chair is often not a member of the department.

Initiating Search

Convening the Search Committee for the first time: The Department Chair and Associate Dean for Academic Affairs are included in the first meeting of the Search Committee. The Chair answers questions about the goals of the search and the Associate Dean reviews the process and diversity considerations (requires about 20 minutes).

At the first meeting, the Search Committee will develop/finalize the Search Plan, paying particular attention to how they will generate a large, diverse and highly qualified pool of candidates.

Search Plan Proposal: The search plan proposal includes a job description and an advertisement. Although the job description informs the construction of the ad, detailed information in the job description is not included in the advertisement.

Use the most up-to-date version of the Search Plan Proposal template. If you start with a Search Plan from a previous search, make sure that it follows the most recent version of the template.

The search committee is expected to contribute to the preparation of the Search Plan, particularly in generating ideas for places to advertise and individuals to contact for soliciting applications or nominations.

In the ad, ask that letters be submitted by referees at the time of application. This saves time for the search committee and sometimes helps with selection of the short list.

All search committees are strongly encouraged to use Academic Jobs Online or Interfolio for advertising and managing applications. These web-based applications make tracking, distributing, and managing applications much less labor intensive. Consult CVM HR or Jill Short for assistance.

Advertising: The position should be advertised in publications, listserves, etc. relevant to the field of expertise. Members of the search committee may have to post the advertisement on listserves to which they are members. Effort should be directed towards identifying qualified underrepresented minorities (all faculty positions) and women (esp. tenure track faculty positions).

Search Committee members are encouraged to contact colleagues at other institutions to inquire about their own interest in the position or to ask for suggestions of potential candidates. Personal contacts are often the most valuable source of strong candidates.

Supplement personal contacts with potential applicants by sending a packet of College and University publications to individuals who need more encouragement. These print materials are helpful in encouraging candidates to explore the College and University by describing programs and opportunities that are available to faculty. A file drawer of these publications is available in the office of the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Contact Jill Short (jms31).

Review of applications and selection of a short list

For searches with large applicant pools (100 or more), search committees have approached screening in different ways. One is to divide the applications into groups of 20 or 30 and have 2 members (or more) of the Committee review each group and to recommend some number of candidates be moved to a preliminary short list of approximately 20-30. The entire committee then reviews these 20-30 and establishes the short list. In another approach, the Search Committee Chair reviews all the applications and ‘triages’ those not qualified. The entire Committee then reviews the qualified candidates.

When the meeting is set for discussing the pool of candidates, invite the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs to attend for the portion of the meeting in which the quality of the pool of applicants is discussed.

As a tool for group discussion and ranking of the smaller pool of candidates, it is helpful to set up a template of qualifications and qualities desired for the position. The qualifications and qualities must be consistent with the advertisement and the position description.

It is important to keep candidates informed of their status. Those candidates who do not have the qualifications required for the position, as well as those who are clearly not competitive, should be politely informed by the Search Committee Chair as soon as possible that they were not selected to be interviewed.

How long is the short list? Interviewing is labor intensive, expensive, and extremely important. We aim to interview a minimum of 3 and rarely interview more than 5 candidates. Some search committees feel that 5 is a ‘good number’.

Candidates who will not be interviewed, or are not on a reserve list for interviews, should be notified of their status at the time that the short list is set.

Inviting candidates to interview: Make every effort to block up the interviews over a short period of time. Scheduling two interviews per week is effective in moving through the interview process quickly and efficiently. Because our experience with the candidates is fresh, we are better able to make comparisons among the candidates.

Interview Process

The itinerary: The interview schedule should be distributed over two days. Limit open time to that allowed for preparing for the seminar and break(s) before dinner(s).

Advertise seminars widely across the college and university with as much advance notice as possible. Place the notice on the College calendar. Seminars should be scheduled at a time that allows attendance by the most people in the home Department. Scheduling interview seminars within a regularly scheduled seminar series sometimes helps boost attendance.

Cornell is a very effective recruiting tool and successful searches use it to advantage.

A candidate’s first impression of Cornell sets their frame of reference for their position as a faculty member. If they meet with members of the Department, their view of the University will be limited to the Department. If they meet with faculty members in other departments and in other colleges, they will view themselves as members of the College and larger University. For these reasons, candidates should meet with individuals outside of the Department and the College of Veterinary Medicine during the interview process. Include faculty members in their field of expertise, potential collaborators, or individuals requested by the candidate.

Search Committee members are expected to be involved in meetings and meals with candidates. If the itinerary is similar across candidates, the same Committee member(s) can meet each candidate at the same time or for the same meal. This helps to standardize the experience for the candidates as well as the Search Committee. Along these lines, try to ask each candidate the same questions so that responses can be compared.

Cornell students are a part of our faculty lives. Cornell students are an impressive group and can help with recruitment if included in the itinerary. The particular student group may vary with the search, and it may be more or less appropriate to include veterinary students, undergraduate

students, grad students, or residents and post-docs. Often these meetings are set up around lunch or coffee/snacks.

Some search committees have included meetings with technical and/or administrative staff and candidates have commented that they were impressed by the caliber and enthusiasm of the staff.

An administrative staff member should be assigned to accompany the candidate from one meeting to the next. This is very important in keeping the candidate on schedule in an arduous day of interviews, seminars and meetings.

Shabby accommodations and bad food do not make a good impression on candidates. At the same time, excessive expense does not convey an appropriate message. Hotel and restaurant selections should be approved by the Department Chair, as some departments have excluded certain establishments. A hotel that affords the candidate a chance to walk around a bit and experience the community in their 'free' time is an attractive option.

Dinners with candidates should include two or three Cornell hosts. Larger groups may be less effective in engaging the candidate in conversation. Keeping in mind that the candidate has had an exhausting day and may be dealing with jet lag, dinners should be scheduled to conclude by 9 or 9:30.

The CHALK TALK: This format of presentation is being used broadly in searches across the College. It seems to be very confusing for the candidates, even those in disciplines where a chalk talk is a very standard procedure.

Our experience is that a Chalk Talk can tell us quite a lot about the potential of a candidate, revealing their strengths and weaknesses in ways that aren't observed in other settings.

The Search Committee Chair should speak with the candidates before their visit and describe the Chalk Talk to them. The topic and format of the chalk talk should be shared with the candidate well in advance of the interview. It is wise to check back with the candidate prior to the interview to be sure that they understand the format.

Generally, this is an hour long, unstructured session without a slide presentation. The candidate is asked to present their plans for the position. For positions with an expectation for accomplishment in research, the question often posed for the Chalk Talk is "what are the specific aims of your first (or next) grant application?". The candidate uses the white board or chalk board to outline their plans. Members of the group interrupt the candidate frequently by asking a variety of questions about the approach and direction of the proposal, sometimes offering alternatives for the candidate to consider or rebut, much like an A exam or thesis defense. The content of the chalk talk is distinct from the candidate's seminar, affording the committee an opportunity to learn more about the direction that the candidate will take in their work.

If the position is primarily a teaching appointment, a candidate might be asked to describe how they would create/structure a course on a subject in their discipline. In extension titles, the talk might pertain to the structure of an outreach program to address a critical problem in the field.

The chalk talk affords the Committee an opportunity to observe how the candidate constructs plans and thinks “on her/his feet,” something that all of us frequently do in our jobs.

Evaluation Process

Search committee members and the department chair should encourage members of the department and those meeting with the candidates to complete a Qualtrics evaluation. Evaluations are collected for use by the search committee and are not distributed.

Ranking the candidates can be facilitated by drawing up a template of desirable accomplishments and attributes and using this template as a focal point for discussion by the search committee.

When the search committee meets for the final time to rank the candidates, the Associate Dean attends for the purpose of collecting feedback on the search process. She does not participate in the ranking of candidates.

End of Search Process

If the negotiation process for successful candidate is lengthy, be sure to keep other candidates informed of the status of the search. The Department Chair should phone unsuccessful short-listed candidates to inform them that they are no longer under consideration.

Second Interviews

Once the candidate has been offered the position, it is common to invite them to return for a second visit. The focus of the 1-2 day visit is recruitment of the candidate to Cornell. Although the itinerary is structured, there are no formal presentations, but rather informal meetings with the department chair to discuss the specifics of the position and space assignment. Other meetings often occur with the appropriate HR representative, grants officer, associate deans and/or the Dean, real estate agent, department administrators, or faculty members with shared interests who may have been absent during the first interview. Tours of the area help to orient the candidate. Search committee and departmental members often participate in meals.