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How Serious Are You About Diversity Hiring?

By Alina Tugend JUNE 17, 2018



David Zentz for The Chronicle

Rahuldeep Gill, an associate professor of religion at California Lutheran U., and Leanne Neilson, the provost, are among the members of the university's "evidence team," which helps recruit and retain a more diverse faculty.

Rahuldeep Gill, an associate professor of religion, is visibly different as a Sikh at California Lutheran University and has often felt alienated during his nine years there.

Faculty members of color, he says, are "hypervisible when they needed us to be in glossy brochures and invisible when it came to our needs." A member of a new task force created to help the university understand how to recruit and retain minority professors, he recounts several incidents of harassment and microaggressions. He was asked if his turban could double as an umbrella, and told he didn't look Lutheran.

"It's not curiosity, it's ignorance, which is maliciousness," he says. "Curiosity involves dignity."

While administrators and fellow faculty members may not have been aware of Gill's feelings a few years ago, they certainly are now. The university, in Thousand Oaks, between Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, has taken a hard look at itself and its efforts to attract and keep nonwhite faculty members, both to become a more welcoming place for professors such as Gill and to better serve its students.

Cal Lutheran has seen its student population change significantly over the past decade. About half of its 4,000 students now are nonwhite, the majority of those Hispanic.

"But as our number of Hispanic students were growing, we were woefully low in Hispanic faculty," says Leanne Neilson, the provost and vice president for academic affairs. About [82 percent](#) of its faculty members, in fact, were white.

So, the 59-year-old institution decided it was time to confront the issue head on. It spent \$100,000 for outside experts to spend a year helping it revamp its search-and-hiring process.

Colleges have long bemoaned the lack of faculty diversity. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, as of the fall of 2016, 83 percent of the full professors in degree-granting postsecondary institutions were white — 55 percent of them men and 27 percent women. Ten percent were Asian/Pacific Islanders, 4 percent were black, and 3 percent were Hispanic. While those proportions have crept up over the years, they have lagged behind the growing number of nonwhite students in American colleges.

Discussions of how to create a faculty more representative of the student population have become repetitive. People give it lip service, says Estela Bensimon, a professor of higher education at the University of Southern California and director of its Center for Urban Education, but then offer endless reasons why they can't do it: " 'They don't apply.' 'There aren't enough in the pipeline.' 'We can't compete with institutions that can pay higher salaries.' But we don't talk about how our hiring system privileges whiteness."

Nonetheless, Bensimon and others agree that at some colleges there is a new effort — as some put it, an *intentionality* — in recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse faculty members. That intentionality entails rewriting recruitment ads, training search committees with evidence-based research on how to avoid falling back into the status quo, and understanding why the process doesn't end with the hire.

Administrators at Cal Lutheran knew they wanted to make wholesale changes, so they hired Bensimon and her team to teach them throughout 2016.

As a result, the university's search process was reconfigured, beginning with recruitment ads that would attract candidates specifically interested in working with Cal Lutheran's student population. The ads refer to the university's designation as a Hispanic-serving institution, meaning that at least 25 percent of its full-time undergraduates are Hispanic. In its ads, Cal Lutheran also states a preference for candidates who can mentor African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students.

"Very few universities mention that in recruitment ads," Bensimon says. "They forget because we have taught ourselves not to acknowledge race." But including it was important "to signal to potential candidates of color that this is a place I should apply for."

Kevin McDonald, vice chancellor for inclusion, diversity, and equity at the University of Missouri system, says ads must go beyond the stale phrases of "equal-opportunity and affirmative-action employer," because "you have to woo prospective faculty as you expect them to woo you."

Consider the job postings for two separate deans for the University of Indiana's School of Education, which is splitting into two schools, one on the flagship campus, in Bloomington, and one in Indianapolis.

The two campuses are very different; Indianapolis is much more diverse in terms of its student population, says Lori Patton Davis, a professor of higher education and student affairs at Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis. She was not on the search committee for the Indianapolis dean but was on a search committee for a dean before the schools were divided.

"The Indianapolis description talks about wanting a dean who understands the importance of antiracist education," she says. "There are clear words in there. If you are not someone who believes in racial justice, social justice, equity, serving races and minoritized populations, then it might not be a good fit."

The Bloomington post is more standard in its wording.



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Rahuldeep Gill, of California Lutheran U., is among the faculty members joining a diversity effort there. "We give tools that help faculty members be anthropologists of their own practice," says an academic consultant who assembled the team.

"I think if you would ask faculty, the commitment to diversity is the same," says Patton Davis. "But how it gets communicated is very different. As a black woman who studies racism in higher education, if I'm going to be looking for a position, the Indianapolis ad would stand out for me more, because it doesn't come across as just general language around diversity."

Beyond recruitment ads, diversity hiring is about creating and maintaining personal relationships, connecting with journals and organizations of interest to faculty

members of color, and helping create a pipeline of candidates, something an increasing number of colleges are doing.

A couple of years ago, the University of Missouri [started a two-year program](#) for postdocs in departments that expect to have tenure-track jobs open within two years. In addition, the office of graduate studies and postdoctoral education meets monthly with the postdocs to help prepare them for faculty roles at Missouri or elsewhere — advising them, for instance, on how to use tools to publicize their research and how to win external funding.

Clemson University has a similar [Pathfinders](#) program for minority doctoral and postdoctoral students, mostly African-American and Hispanic. Lee A. Gill, the university's chief inclusion and equity officer, says he has appointed an associate director of faculty-diversity recruitment, "whose sole job is to go out into the hinterlands to recruit them for Clemson."

Clemson brings in about a dozen doctoral students and postdocs yearly under the program, in departments where there will be openings in the near future. When those job become available, he says, "we have somebody waiting in the wings."

The issue of diversity affects all institutions, including historically black

colleges and universities. "We just have to think about diversity in a different way," says Ontario Wooden, associate vice chancellor for innovative, engaged, and global education at North Carolina Central University.

That means focusing on factors in addition to color when recruiting faculty members. Are they from a rural area? Are they the first in their families to go to college? "It's important to have a faculty not only responsive to students but who understand it by lived experience," he says.

"Many people have a misguided notion that all faculty at HBCUs are black," says Fred Bonner, a professor of educational leadership and counseling at Prairie View A&M University and executive director of its Minority Achievement, Creativity, and High Ability Center, known as Mach-III. In fact, says Wooden, 57 percent of faculty members at HBCUs, on average, are African-American.

Putting principles into practices takes leadership, resources, and commitment. Some colleges are taking specific steps to shake up the status quo.

"STEM areas look just like at predominantly white institutions," Bonner says. After all, everyone wants those African-American STEM Ph.D.s. "It's very competitive, but you want to put folks in front of students, especially where they're underrepresented, that look like them."

In [an article](#) in *The Washington Post* two years ago, Marybeth Gasman, a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote: "The reason we don't have more faculty of color among college faculty is that we don't want them. We simply don't

want them." Judging by the article's 1,061 comments — and Gasman says she received 7,000 responses through emails sent directly to her — she hit a nerve.

Predominantly white institutions would do well to study HBCUs to emulate how they do their hiring, Gasman says. "They're much more open to the types of institutions people come from, and much more open about people coming in that are different than themselves. They're also more open to the kinds of skills people can bring and not wedded to just one model of faculty members."

Once a hiring committee has a good array of candidates, it risks sinking back

into a status quo mind-set. Focus, experts say, on "interrupting the usual." That's what **Bentley University**, in Waltham, Mass., has tried to do. "If we're working to develop the pool," asks Katherine Lampley, director of its office of diversity and inclusion, "why aren't more making it through the hiring process?" The university's leaders, she says, recognized the two obstacles: "the individual's conscious or unconscious bias and the process itself."

Bentley began a pilot project a year ago, offering a two-hour workshop to everyone on search committees — the first hour on implicit and individual bias, the second on process. The committees were asked to follow particular steps: Specify job qualifications ahead of time, and use those as the only criteria against which candidates are evaluated; run a posting through a gender-decoder program that flags words or phrases that might signal that a job candidate should be male or female; discuss the listings after the decoding; and evaluate candidates individually, not as a group.

Having a committee meet as a group to decide on which candidates to call back can lead to groupthink or dominance by a more senior faculty member, Lampley says. Instead, each member should separately select her or his top candidate, give those selections to the chair, then come together to compare notes.

The workshops and adoption of those steps were voluntary. Out of 11 searches this year, eight of the committees went through the pilot project. Lampley thinks it made a difference.

"One committee, for example, was planning to phone-screen the candidates at their next meeting," she says. "After the workshop, they shifted the priority of the meeting

to talk about bias and delayed the phone interviews to be more thoughtful. And that was a search committee that was primarily white men."

The workshop henceforth will be required of anyone on a search committee, and Bentley will offer a similar program to hiring managers on the staff side, Lampley says.

Andy Aylesworth, an associate professor of marketing who took part in the Bentley pilot program, says he was nervous about asking his committee to participate, "but I didn't get any pushback." Taking an implicit-bias test, he says, was helpful. "I think it's really easy to say, 'I understand there's implicit bias, and I'm not going to let it affect me.' It's different having a score in front of me. It made the conversation more tangible."

“We in no way think that the workshop in and of itself will change a culture.”

At Duke University, for the past three years, every new faculty member in arts and sciences — which comprises about 80 to 85 percent of the faculty — has gone through a workshop on implicit bias. The university is starting to require it for the professional schools, too.

"There's been a proliferation of research that speaks to the importance of subtle and implicit bias in hiring," says Benjamin D. Reese Jr., chief diversity officer and vice president of Duke's office for institutional equity. "We in no way think that the workshop in and of itself will change a culture and mitigate the influence of structural racism, sexism, and homophobia. But we think it's one component in building a more inclusive and engaged faculty."

Those on search committees at Duke are trained further and sometimes have reminders in front of them when discussing candidates. Business-sized laminated cards that Reese hands out caution interviewers how they might be biased according to a candidate's actual or assumed race, gender, age, pedigree, weight, culture, language, accent, or sexual orientation.

Cal Lutheran has taken an even deeper dive, including an anti-bias checklist for four different stages of the search process: job announcements; application reviews; reference checks, phone interviews, and choosing finalists; and campus visits by finalists. A dean has to sign off on the anti-bias integrity of each of the four stages.

Eighteen faculty members, along with Provost Neilson and the dean of the Graduate School of Education were on the evidence team that Estela Bensimon, the professor from Southern Cal, assembled to help recruit and retain a more diverse faculty at Cal Lutheran. Over five months, she and her colleagues met with the team for three hours monthly.

Out of that work they developed the idea of "equity advocates," one of whom sat on every search committee. Those advocates "came with the status and knowledge where they could call out the search committees when they were not being consistent with the new equity goals," Bensimon says. "We give tools that help faculty members be anthropologists of their own practice."

It's crucial, Bensimon says, to be willing to look beyond traditional criteria: where candidates went to school and what journals they're published in. "Universities want faculty members who have gone to Ivy League institutions and come with all sorts of fellowships and experiences with well-known faculty members. That doesn't take into account that faculty of color have not always had that experience. Also, often faculty of color do work on racial issues and are published in journals that may not be considered first-class. People who get grants, get published in top journals — it's often due to networks, and those networks are white."

“Administrators will tell me about all they're doing for faculty of color, but faculty will tell me they feel excluded. There's a disconnect.”

As Lee Gill, the inclusion officer at Clemson, says, the status-quo benchmarks that are used to find and measure candidates often "create this bubble that minorities and women are unable to break into."

At Duke, as elsewhere, trying to change search committees' long-held values has had varying success, says Reese. "It's certainly a challenge to help people broaden their perspective and recognize that excellence often presents itself in a variety of forms, and that people can be at the top of their game even though they come from what some people would consider 'second-class schools.' "

The concern about diverse faculty can't stop once the hiring is complete.

Retaining professors of color requires continuing effort and an awareness not just of the college cultural climate but also of the wider community.

"Any university that is more rural-based, and not near an urban or metropolitan district and is predominantly white, is going to be a bit more of a struggle," says Patton Davis, the education professor at Indiana-Purdue. When she was offered a job at Iowa State University, she recalls, she specifically asked to speak to a black woman on the faculty to find out how she felt living in the area.

When recruiting, hiring committees need to look at "things that make you happy beyond your job," Patton Davis says. Those things may be different for black women than for white women. "It's about finding a place to get your hair done, or pantyhose that are your color or hair products or a radio station that plays my music. It's quality of life."

"One of the things I've noticed when I come to campuses," says Marybeth Gasman, of Penn, "is that administrators will tell me about all they're doing for faculty of color, but faculty will tell me they feel excluded. There's a disconnect."

Cal Lutheran, over the past three years, has gone from 17-percent nonwhite faculty to 24 percent, a result that administrators are proud of. But more important, they say, the culture has begun to shift. During their evidence-team meetings, "nonwhite faculty started sharing their experience of what it was like to be a person of color here, and it was eye-opening," says Neilson. "We had some deep emotional types of conversations, but I would say in general, outside the evidence team, I don't think faculty of color felt comfortable talking about their experiences."

She'd always thought of the university as "a very pleasant and nice place" and wasn't aware that some of her colleagues did not. "I had my blinders on," she says.

While some of the harassing comments that faculty members of color have mentioned may have been weak attempts at humor, Gasman argues that "when someone is 'othered' constantly, then you're contributing to it."

After a sabbatical a few years ago, Rahuldeep Gill, the Sikh associate professor of religion at Cal Lutheran, seriously thought about not returning. Since the university's

new efforts, however, he has "recommitted to the university," he says. "I'm grateful for the change. There's definitely a more inclusive attitude. But I see the work we've still got to do. Ask me again in five years."