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Cluster hiring: Fad or best practice?

Schools reveal how cluster hiring helps strengthen faculty and outcomes

By: Carol Patton

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Cluster hiring of faculty is an effective strategy that has been around for at least 15 years. Ask universities that practice it and they'll tell you it strengthens faculty diversity and promotes new research opportunities.

The practice also encourages faculty to collaborate across multiple disciplines and departments to develop creative academic programs and outreach initiatives.

Sounds good. So why aren't more higher education institutions practicing it?

Change isn't always easy, especially when it involves traditional [hiring practices](#). Also, some faculty may not feel completely at home in their own department or may clash with others who have different cultures, ideas and values.

Still, many universities believe the benefits far outweigh the risks. Consider the results of a report titled "[Faculty](#)



Carol Patton is a Las Vegas-based writer who specializes in human resources issues.

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[Cluster Hiring for Diversity and Institutional Climate,](#)” from the Urban Universities for Health. Researchers studied 10 U.S. universities that practice cluster hiring. The programs—which originated in the office of the provost, president or chancellor—were found to be an effective strategy for increasing diversity and strengthening institutional climate.

Building diversity

The University of Wisconsin-Madison was one of the first to roll out the strategy back in 1998. Among its first clusters was “agroecology,” developed in 2002 and representing the fields of entomology, community and environmental sociology, and agronomy, says Maureen Bischof, associate vice provost at the school.

Three faculty members were hired that year to “embrace the intersection of agriculture and ecology.” They produced over 100 publications on the subject and won more than \$6.5 million in external grants. The cohort was so successful that the school began offering a new agroecology master of science degree, she says.

Likewise, California State University, Fresno, supports numerous research cohorts, including water technology, health, world cultures and globalization, and urban and regional transformation, explains Jody H. Hironaka-Juteau, dean in the college of health and human services.

The campus started its cluster hiring program in 2009, partly to “de-silo” researchers, she says. The health cohort addresses health disparities, obesity, asthma and air quality. The faculty in this cluster—with backgrounds in child development, biology, public health, environmental sciences, women’s studies and more—cross numerous boundaries.

“When you bring people together with diverse backgrounds like this, the ground you can cover—not only in research, but being able to advance other types of work—helps to move institutions forward,” says Hironaka-Juteau.

HR’s vital role

Hironaka-Juteau says HR can help establish a strong infrastructure for the program, develop hiring criteria, solicit early buy-in from deans and department heads, and identify clear expectations for faculty in clusters.

So far, Cal State, Fresno has hired 39 faculty members for five different clusters.

“The opportunity to do some intentional hires in clusters that addressed regional issues was the focal point,” she says.

North Carolina State University authorized 12 research clusters in 2011, says Laura R. Severin, special assistant to the provost for academic planning.

“When you hire the first person, that may change what you want in the second and third person,” she says. “You may have some needs that are filled by the first person that you didn’t anticipate. Then you have to rethink the skills and experiences needed for persons two and three.”

Recruiting researchers at all levels comes with a hefty price tag. In this era of budget cuts, Severin says, some faculty question whether the money might be spent in more efficient ways.

So getting back to my original question: Why isn’t your school engaged in cluster hiring? While they may involve short-term financial sacrifices, the benefits can be lifelong, deep and widespread.

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