

Recruiting Diverse Leaders: Best Practices for Academic Medical Centers

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The slow growth of women and underrepresented minorities in medical school leadership is well documented. According to the AAMC's 2018 *U.S. Medical Schools Faculty Report*, for example, women account for just 19 percent of all permanent deans, and 18 percent of all permanent department chairs. This is up from only 15 percent five years ago. While the reasons for this are many, it is clear many institutions are seeking ways to get a leg up on attracting a more diverse and highly qualified pool of leaders. In our executive recruiting work assisting institutions across the country, we have compiled a list of the best practices for search committees.

Forming Search Committees with Diversity in Mind

Keeping diversity in mind while forming a search committee can be a critical step in any leadership recruitment. The committee should at least reflect the diversity of faculty and staff at the institution, if not the aspirational goals for the make-up of its leadership. If it doesn't, it will be hard pressed to convince candidates that they will be walking into an inclusive environment. Some institutions are also utilizing "diversity advocates" or "search advocates" on committees. These are faculty and staff with diversity recruitment training whose role is to ensure equity and inclusiveness throughout the process.

A Clear Charge

For committee members, hearing that diversity is an important factor in their charge is important. Many deans in academic medicine have adopted the "Rooney

Rule," the policy many industries have adopted from Dan Rooney, former owner of the Pittsburgh Steelers and past chair of the National Football League's diversity committee. The rule requires organizations to interview minority candidates for top positions. Some organizations have gone a step further, declaring to the committee at the onset that a pool of finalists that includes no diversity will result in a failed search.

Reaching More Diverse Networks of Candidates

It is expected that the search committee will advertise the position broadly and target appropriate diversity-related publications and outlets, yet rarely is this outreach adequate to attract a significant number of diverse candidates. Actively networking with diversity-focused societies and subgroups of national organizations can be more productive. Many women- and minority-focused groups, for example, share their own networking listservs or have their own networking activities. Search committees can tally what connections their institution's faculty and staff have and use these connections to reach out to new and different candidates.

Once potential female and minority candidates have been identified, committee members can be assigned to reach out with personal notes and emails inviting their interest in the position. If a search firm is used to handle this outreach, a "progress" meeting mid-way through the recruitment period with the full committee can be an opportune time to talk through specific candidates and determine the best strategy to reach them. Firms should

also be accountable for ensuring every avenue to diversify the slate has been attempted. Using a search firm should result in a more diverse slate – our placement rate for diverse and/or women leaders at academic medical centers, for example, is more than 50 percent higher than the average representation of these leaders.

Nurturing Nominations (and Confronting the Imposter Syndrome)

In the course of WittKieffer's 10 most recent dean of medicine searches, we have noticed an interesting pattern: Approximately eight percent of all men who were contacted as prospective candidates ultimately expressed interest in the position. Notably, only four percent of women contacted expressed interest in the position. If, however, a woman was nominated by a colleague, the gender difference evaporated—26 percent of women and 24 percent of men who were nominated by a third party replied to express interest in the position. These results could likely be attributed to the “imposter syndrome” – women feeling they should not apply because they believe they do not meet the requirements or are less qualified for the position than others. Letting women know they are specifically put forward for the position seems to mitigate this concern.

The nomination process is, therefore, important. Often committee members, faculty and staff are encouraged to nominate prospective candidates. Committee members can also actively solicit their networks to put forth nominations – and to specifically ask for women and underrepresented minorities to be nominated. Further, if a nominator only submits the names of white men, the committee can ask that person to reconsider and to think of potential diversity candidates to nominate. Finally, the position requirements are important; job descriptions should be crafted in a way that does not eliminate individuals based on arbitrary requirements for years of experience and/or exhaustive required work experiences and qualifications.

An Unbiased Interview

Search committees often receive unconscious bias training at the beginning of the search process, and this

can be useful to frame the search and help eliminate discrimination in evaluating candidates on paper. (A good reference is AAMC's [resource page](#) for health professionals regarding unconscious bias, including an excellent video on the topic.) Interviews, however, are where bias can be most prominent. Search committee chairs and diversity advocates should remind the committee of their bias training immediately prior to the interviews. In candidate interviews, members should be encouraged to listen for content and not simply how a candidate performs in the interview setting.

Members should also be encouraged to keep each other honest around discussions of “fit” while evaluating candidates, as this may imply that future leaders should resemble and act like past ones. After the initial candidates have been interviewed, the committee should review the group to determine if every reasonable effort was made to diversify the candidate pool. If not, an extended recruitment period with a new strategy may be the best decision.

Keeping the Larger Goal in Mind

The recruiting and hiring of diverse candidates requires a holistic effort on the part of everyone involved in an executive search. These efforts are pivotal to success in hiring and to the continuing goal of diversifying the leadership ranks in academic medicine.

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