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New report says cluster hiring can lead to increased faculty diversity

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Cluster hiring -- or hiring multiple scholars into one or more departments based on shared, interdisciplinary research interests -- is growing in popularity. Increasingly it's also seen as a way to advance faculty diversity or other aspects of the college or university mission, such as teaching or community engagement. But how effective is cluster hiring generally, and specifically in promoting diversity and creating a positive institutional climate? And what are some established best practices to those ends?

A new report from the Coalition for Urban Serving Universities, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, and the Association of American Medical Colleges, which have partnered as Urban Universities for HEALTH, tackles those questions and concludes that cluster hiring -- when done right -- is a powerful way to build both institutional excellence and faculty diversity.

"Although the process was originally designed to expand interdisciplinary research, [cluster hiring] also impacts both faculty diversity and components of institutional climate, including the learning environment, collaboration, community engagement and success of faculty from all backgrounds," reads the report, which identifies diversity not only in terms of race, ethnicity and gender but also perspective, ideology and methodology.

Cluster hiring programs, it continues, "have the potential to improve institutional excellence over all by breaking down silos, reallocating resources to benefit the whole institution and attracting innovative, nontraditional scholars."

The practice in a formal sense originated at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 1998; since then 149 cluster faculty lines have been created for 48 different clusters or research areas at Madison, from African languages to zebra fish biology, according to the report. Other programs on other campuses have flourished similarly, while others have not.

To determine what makes for effective cluster hiring, the land-grant and urban-serving university associations commissioned a qualitative research study overseen by various university provosts and experts. (The query is also part of a larger effort by the Urban Universities for HEALTH to diversify the health and biomedical sciences workforce.)

The study, called "[Faculty Cluster Hiring for Diversity and Institutional Climate](#) ^[1]," is based on interviews with administrators and faculty members with experience in cluster hiring at 10 geographically diverse public research institutions.

"Before now we didn't know what specifically institutions were doing, how they structured their programs or how they achieved success," said Susan D. Phillips, senior vice president for academic affairs at State University of New York Downstate Medical Center and vice president for strategic partnerships at SUNY Albany, and report committee chair, during a webcast announcing the report Thursday. "We wanted to know first, what are the characteristics of the most successful programs? Second, what are some challenges that institutions experience that we might avoid in the future? And third, how have these programs impacted the diversity and the climate, both at the institutions that have developed these programs according to specific goals, and those that have not?"

Characteristics of Cluster Hire Programs

No two cluster hiring programs were identical, but a series of trends emerged from the interviews. Most institutions developed their programs to increase diversity or interdisciplinary research, or both. Originators of most programs also obtained "buy-in" from senior university leaders before approaching deans and department heads later in the process. All interviewees thought deans' approval was most important, since deans sign off on new hires. And the majority of interviewees said existing faculty members' input or approval was key to a cluster's success.

The dominant model for introducing clusters was an open, campuswide competition for proposals for research topics and associated faculty lines. Interviewees said this generally worked well, but representatives of one institution said that such a competition, with few parameters, could result in departments and schools asking for cluster hires merely to add faculty lines. Some institutions developed faculty-administrative task forces to assess the applications for value.

Most institutions hired at least some cluster faculty members into joint appointments across programs. Whether the clusters targeted junior or senior faculty members depended on their goals. Arizona State University and Florida International University, for example, focused on senior hires to build research prominence. Clusters aimed at increasing diversity or interdisciplinary collaboration skewed more junior.

What about management of the clusters? Some institutions created formal mechanisms for collaborations, such as discussion groups, conferences or team teaching. A cluster coordinator or designated faculty member often worked to ensure the cluster met its goals. But other institutions offered little structure beyond the initial hiring agreement with the cluster members, and their clusters were ultimately less successful.

The committee said it was surprised by the variation of funding models for cluster hires and how little impact the models had on the ultimate success of the clusters. Those models fell into three main categories. In the shared-cost model, about 50 percent of funding came from the university provost's or chancellor's office and the other 50 percent from the individual schools or colleges. In the centralized model, funding came from the research office and provost, and in the decentralized model, schools and colleges absorbed most of the cost. Madison, the study's funding outlier, received all funding from three sources outside the university, but it's transitioning first to the shared and ultimately the decentralized models.

Across the sample, cluster hiring initiatives cost \$1.5 million to \$36 million. Most institutions only began cluster hiring within the last eight years and had not yet developed comprehensive evaluations or metrics for the success of their programs. Developing evaluations not yet in place include such metrics as research dollars won and number of publications by cluster hires, number of new programs and research centers, and promotion and tenure rates.

Impact on Diversity and Climate

Most institutions reported that they'd hired cluster faculty members who were more diverse in terms of race, ethnicity and gender than those hired through traditional department searches. Other kinds of diversity, such as ideology, were reported by the institutions that could measure them. At the University of Hawaii at Manoa, for example, five of seven of those hired into the sustainability cluster were women -- three of whom were native Hawaiian. One of those women was the first female native Hawaiian scholar ever to be hired in engineering at the university.

Even some programs that didn't focus on diversity in cluster hiring reported increased diversity as a result. At North Carolina State University, for example, the percentage of minority faculty members increased from 16 to 18 percent after cluster hiring, while Fresno State University observed a 2 percent increase in Hispanic faculty members and a 3 percent increase in female faculty.

Marc Nivet, chief diversity officer for the Association of American Medical Colleges and member of the National Institutes of Health's National Advisory General Medical Sciences Council, said during the webcast that sometimes cluster hiring makes institutions more appealing to minority candidates, who may avoid other hiring methods for fear of being the "only" minority faculty member in their respective departments or campuses. "We've struggled mightily, as you know well, to diversify the nation's faculty members and I think a big part of that is what I tend to call anticipatory nonsocialization."

Cluster hiring administrators used a variety of strategies to increase diversity in recruitment. Four out of 10 universities provided diversity training to search committees and three formed clusters around disciplines that tend to be diverse, such as Latin American studies or health equity. Other strategies included ensuring the search committee was diverse and pumping up overall recruitment efforts, such as advertising in new publications and offering dual-career hiring for academic couples.

At all institutions in the study, cluster hiring had positive effects on at least one element of campus climate -- most commonly interdisciplinary collaboration. Institutions also reported more energy and more collaboration among faculty members. Interviewees also reported that faculty cluster hires were as productive if not more so than their noncluster peers, and that faculty retention improved. Regarding academics, the clusters created new courses, and research and mentoring opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students were enriched, the report says. Several institutions also reported increased engagement with local and state governments and businesses.

Negative Effects

Even with so many reported advantages, cluster hiring has its drawbacks, too. Many interviewees said they'd had difficulty obtaining approval from deans and chairs not involved in the hiring process. Faculty hired to joint appointments reported being overworked. And some junior faculty members hired to do interdisciplinary work said they'd backed off from it because their efforts would not count toward tenure in their home departments.

Start-up costs for labs or work spaces also stalled some programs. On the flip side, some interviewees said it was difficult to shut down or sunset clusters that had become obsolete. Clusters focused on building the university's research reputation had trouble recruiting senior scholars, who either found little motivation to move or received better offers elsewhere. The clusters also faced an image problem from faculty members who didn't understand or weren't convinced of their value.

Case Study

The report includes snapshots of several institutions' programs. That of North Carolina State University stands out for its success -- it's currently engaging in a second round of cluster hiring -- and policies and practices, as well the fact that its impact on diversity was largely unintended.

The program was imported by Chancellor Randy Woodson, who was previously oversaw a cluster hiring initiative as provost of Purdue University. At North Carolina State, Woodson helped develop infrastructure to support interdisciplinary collaboration -- primarily tenure and promotion policies that encourage this kind of work. Working with their department heads, cluster hires can choose to be reviewed by a department committee or an interdisciplinary committee. A yearlong schedule of mentoring, conferences and other events also brings cluster hires together on a regular basis. Cluster hires have a dedicated campus space in which to gather and an annual symposium exposes the general faculty to their work.

Since 2011, the university has hired 35 faculty members to 12 different clusters, to the tune of \$25 million. A few appointments are joint, and about 65 percent of the hires are senior faculty.

Interviewees from the university said they were surprised that the new faculty members started connecting both their own clusters and other clusters shortly after their arrival on campus.

"What really has changed or evolved in our thinking," Woodson said in the webcast, was to "make sure you have policies and procedures in place and that you have tenure and promotion guidelines that recognize faculty hired across clusters, and that you really bring the culture of the institution together along at the same time you're hiring clusters."

Shifting the Culture

Phillips, the committee chair, said that was one of the central findings: that cluster hiring programs live and die by how supported they are once the new faculty members are on campus. "Is the infrastructure there to support collaboration?" Moreover, she asked, is there space and time and a dedicated administrator or faculty member make sure the work continues?

Based on their findings, the committee members made the following recommendations for cluster hiring:

- Make diversity goals explicit and develop supporting strategies to achieve those goals, such as expanding recruitment and targeting disciplines where diversity is more prevalent.
- Work to ensure early buy-in from department heads and especially deans.
- Engage faculty members early in the process and follow the lead of professors, since silos may form without their buy-in.
- Establish clear expectations for cluster hires from the beginning, such as how they'll be evaluated for promotion and tenure and what resources are available to them. (Written agreements that span departments and affected colleges will protect joint hires' time.)
- Give cluster hires credit for work they perform as part of the cluster in the tenure and promotion process. Doing so provides an incentive to engage in interdisciplinary research in the long run.
- Establish infrastructure to support interdisciplinary collaboration, such as hiring faculty in cohorts and holding regular events where informal social networking can occur.

- Communicate the value of the program to stakeholders across the institution, so that short-term sacrifices will be seen as longer-term investments.
- Develop a plan for sustaining the program throughout leadership changes, such as embedding it in a strategic plan or obtaining external funding commitments.

Laura Severin, professor of English and special assistant to the provost for academic planning at North Carolina State University, was an early proponent of cluster hiring (including writing about it for *Inside Higher Ed* [2] in 2013). She served as an expert adviser to the committee and said that she thought the report was a valuable contribution to the study of the emerging practice -- particularly its finding that cluster hiring can increase faculty diversity.

“My research on early cluster hiring programs had suggested that this might not be the case, but this report reveals that the situation is more complex,” Severin said via email. “The report demonstrates that cluster hiring can be used for purposes of diversifying the faculty if institutions make diversity a priority and are skillful in setting up their hiring processes. For me, that is the most significant result.”

Diversity [3]

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Links:

[1] http://urbanuniversitiesforhealth.org/media/documents/Faculty_Cluster_Hiring_Report.pdf

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2013/09/30/essay-how-colleges-can-engage-cluster-hiring>

[3] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity>

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