

## COMMENTARY

### Reaching Your Top Talent Destination: Insights on Chairing a Search Committee

Brian A. Hemstreet, PharmD, Laura M. Borgelt, PharmD

University of Colorado, Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Aurora, Colorado

**Corresponding Author:** Brian A. Hemstreet, University of Colorado, Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, 12850 E. Montview Blvd, Rm V20-1116V, Aurora, CO 80045. Tel: 303-724-2633. Email: brian.hemstreet@cuanschutz.edu

Submitted November 19, 2021; accepted March 23, 2022; ePublished March 2022

Faculty members in academic roles are often called upon to serve as chair of a search committee. This can be both an important and challenging role. Many faculty members may not have previous experience with search committees or have undergone formal search committee training. Given the critical nature of conducting an effective search, the goal of this commentary is to provide practical guidance and insight on how to effectively fulfill the role as chair of a search committee. Literature and institutional policies regarding best practices in serving as a search committee chair were reviewed and recommendations on navigating the various aspects of service as a committee chair and how to approach this role are provided.

**Keywords:** search committee, committee chair, faculty

#### INTRODUCTION

One of the most unique and empowering aspects of shared governance in academia is the opportunity for faculty to lead or serve on a search committee. Search committees play a vital role in recruiting, evaluating, and recommending the most qualified candidates for a variety of positions within the university. Faculty members play a critical role in this process, but are often not formally trained in approaches to serving on or chairing a search committee. The aim of this article is to provide insights about structures and processes for chairing a search committee based on existing evidence and our own experiences to ensure a strong pipeline of educators for the pharmacy profession.<sup>1,2</sup>

The search committee chair serves several critical roles in establishing how the committee conducts business and navigates the search process. For this article, we will assume that the hiring authority (Dean, Department Chair, etc.) has provided a position description indicating the responsibilities, allocation of effort, the minimum and preferred qualifications for candidates, the required documentation and method for submission of application materials, and contact information for the committee chair and/or human resources (HR) department.

Efforts should be made to ensure that diversity of committee members is established. This includes diversity in gender, race, age, rank, and disabilities. Incorporating alumni, clinical partners, or members from other departments or units outside of the school or college may also diversify the committee. An equity “advisor” or “champion” or search committee advocate could be appointed or invited to support and ensure equitable actions throughout the search process. Additionally, implicit or unconscious bias training for search committee members should be recommended to ensure an equitable process. The size of the committee may vary, however avoiding large committees promotes efficiency, particularly for scheduling of meetings and interviews. Our own institution recommends three to seven committee members.<sup>3</sup> Having an odd number of committee members is beneficial to avoid ties if voting is used.

#### *Establishing Roles and Responsibilities as Committee Chair*

Ensuring that roles and responsibilities of the chair and committee members are clear should ensure that the search process runs effectively. **(Table 1)** Favorable characteristics of an effective chair include ensuring all opinions are heard and keeping the process moving forward on an appropriate timeline.<sup>4</sup> The chair also needs to be prepared for difficult discussions that can occur during committee deliberations, and strive to maintain objectivity and balance the perspectives of all committee members. One of the chair’s main roles is to set expectations for how the search process will run. Proactively contacting the HR representative serving as your resource for the search allows process and workflow questions to be addressed in a timely fashion. Requesting administrative support to assist in the scheduling of interviews, booking of travel, and processing of reimbursements will enable candidates have the best experience possible. The chair serves as the primary line of communication to all candidates and should make every effort to maintain confidentiality during the search process.

Prior to the search commencing, it's beneficial for the chair to convene the committee and the hiring authority to discuss the hiring authority's expectations for the desired characteristics, number of finalist candidates, and timeline for filling the position. It is helpful to know if the hiring authority would like to receive a ranked or non-ranked list of acceptable candidates with identified strengths and weaknesses of each candidate. Information related to title, rank and salary are generally left to the negotiation process, as this may vary based on the position and the candidate's experience. Should questions arise from the committee, the chair can clarify by serving as the primary liaison to both the hiring authority and HR.

The chair should also facilitate an understanding about the manner in which preliminary reviews of applicants will be conducted. This includes how the committee will evaluate viable candidates to determine who will advance to the next step in the process. Having established and consistent criteria, including a rubric for evaluation is preferred. Also, it is important to establish the standard for decision making throughout various stages of the search, whether by consensus, majority or some other method.

### ***Diversity of Candidates***

The best search committees advocate for inclusion and diversity and ensure that semifinalist and finalist pools present candidates from different backgrounds and experiences to demonstrate alignment with the mission and vision of the university, college, or program. Failure to recruit and fairly evaluate a diverse pool of candidates from the beginning of the search process may jeopardize the search and result in a narrow pool of similar candidates. Federal regulations ensure equal opportunity for all qualified applicants and help to prevent selection of candidates on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, persons with disabilities or chronic medical conditions cannot be discriminated against if they can perform the essential functions of the position with or without reasonable accommodation. It should not be an expectation that committee members of underrepresented groups be solely responsible for identifying candidates who will help to enhance diversity. The chair should work with the HR representative to ensure advertising for the position reaches the most diverse candidate pool possible. The current demographic of disproportionately more White and Asian pharmacy faculty members compared with disproportionately less Hispanic and African American/Black faculty members reinforces the need for effective diversity and inclusion strategies.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Internal Candidates***

Searches involving internal candidates may be particularly challenging and should have an objective and equitable process. An internal candidate should not chair or serve on the search committee when they are an applicant for the position. The chair should set the expectation that confidentiality of the candidates is of the utmost importance to preserve the integrity of the search process. Search committee meetings should be held outside the department office area, if applicable, and avoid potential hallway discussions. Any public comments should be made by the chair in consultation with HR or the hiring authority. Representatives of the search committee should be selected so as to minimize potential bias and any potential conflicts should be disclosed when any applicants are discussed. The chair will have a critical role in ensuring that any internal candidate does not have an unfair advantage over external applicants and likewise that external applicants do not sense an internal candidate has an unfair advantage.

If the internal applicant is not a viable candidate for the position, then best practice would suggest not to interview them. The chair plays a vital role in respectfully communicating the rationale for this decision with the internal applicant (or any applicant) and can emphasize the importance of maintaining the integrity of the process and being honest about their suitability for the job. If feedback is requested by the candidate, comments should focus on the candidate's performance and qualifications, but not in comparison to other candidates. This is especially the case if the internal candidate were to be reconsidered after external candidates cancelled or were no longer viable. Overall, candidates need to be treated honestly and fairly throughout the search.

When interviewing internal candidates, there may be a perception that committee members already know the candidate and do not have new information to learn. However, effective internal interviews can provide valuable new insight about a known candidate.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the focus of the interview should be on gaining new information; keeping in mind that the internal candidate should be evaluated on the same criteria as other candidates as much as possible. Internal candidates should be able to provide responses to questions that reveal more about the policies, norms, and culture of the school/college. Questions may be more focused on the future and their vision of the position rather than past experience or performance. Internal interviews should be held prior to external interviews so that information about external candidates or their interviews is not available to the internal candidate. Additionally, the interview process should be conducted in the

same way as other external candidates. Once the candidate has completed the interview, they should not be involved in the search process for external candidates.

### ***The Interview Process***

Screening interviews are typically the first step in the selection process. These interviews were historically performed by phone, but video conference technology has enabled screening interviews to provide insights into a candidate's professionalism and expertise. While it is advisable to get administrative support for setting up screening interviews, the chair may be responsible for developing standard questions asked during the screening process. We advise the chair work with HR and the committee members to develop behavior-based questions related to the position. **(Table 2).**<sup>9</sup> We also advise the duration of the screening interview be a total of 30-60 minutes with time at the end for the candidate to ask questions of the search committee. Not only is this an opportunity for the committee to learn more about the candidate, it is a window of opportunity to shed positive light on the position and the institution. Candidates in this stage of the interview process often wish their candidacy to remain private, so the chair should ensure that information is not made public.

Once candidates move to semi-final or finalist interviews, the chair will be responsible for constructing interview agendas. We recommended engaging the search committee members in this process to ensure all stakeholders are included as part of the agenda. The chair will often ensure that candidate materials are made available to all stakeholders prior to the interview and will often introduce candidates for each part of their interview, so the chair should be familiar with the candidate's background.

### ***Considerations For The Chair In The Search Process***

There are often situations that can occur throughout the search process that can be difficult to navigate. The first is the decision on how many rounds of interviews to conduct. If there are a large number of viable candidates following the screening interview process, there may be a need to conduct a semi-finalist round. One benefit is the ability to hear more in-depth information about the candidates; however, this is more time consuming and may be resource intensive. The chair can consult with the HR representative and the hiring authority to gauge interest in proceeding directly to finalist interviews or incorporating an intermediate round.

It should be determined prior to evaluation of candidates if they will be evaluated by the committee on a consensus basis or via formal vote. Various approaches may be used, such as open discussion and voting or an anonymous approach using a ballot box or polling software. The voting rights of the chair should also be determined ahead of time. In most instances, when a voting process is used for evaluation, it is recommended that the chair only vote in the event of a tie.

One of the most important aspects of an effective search is facilitating effective communication with candidates. Given the chair is the primary person involved in communicating with candidates, we've found that a more personalized approach of the chair communicating directly rather than an HR representative is often better received and appreciated. This includes offering to speak with prospective applicants about the position. This approach leads to better engagement in the process, and often results in candidates making a more informed determination about whether the position is a good fit. The most challenging part of the process is informing applicants that they are no longer a candidate for the position, especially in the case of internal candidates. We've found contacting candidates directly and being direct and honest is the best approach. Avoiding generic emails that may come from the HR system once their candidacy is no longer considered is not optimal. Lastly, the chair and the hiring authority should decide on how to communicate with remaining candidates in situations where a preferred candidate declines an offer,

### **CONCLUSION**

Participating in a search committee is a privilege and benefit of shared governance. Additionally, it is critical to hire top talent if an institution wants the greatest potential to achieve institutional success. This makes search committee structure and processes one of the most important job responsibilities for faculty. The committee chair plays a key role in the success of the search.

Best practices can be followed for a highly productive, efficient, and collaborative search committee. These include structuring the committee with diverse members and establishing roles and responsibilities of the chair and committee members early in the search process. Once the committee has clear goals and objectives, the committee chair is responsible for ensuring diversity of candidates as well providing consistency, fairness, and confidentiality in the process. An understanding of unconscious or inherent bias is critical throughout the candidate screening and selection process. Other best practices that have been identified include focusing on the known about the candidate without speculating

about their motivation; advancing a candidate based on potential rather than experience; concentrating on competence, fit, and “soft skills”, such as leadership, emotional intelligence, engagement, creativity etc., more than work history; balancing evaluation of the candidate with “selling” the opportunity; and treating candidates well since the committee is often the first people they will meet.<sup>4</sup>

## REFERENCES

1. DiPiro JT. A culture of hiring for excellence. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2011;75(5):97. doi:10.5688/ajpe75597.
2. Covvey JR, Cohron PP, Mullen AB. Examining pharmacy workforce issues in the United States and the United kingdom. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2015;79(2):17. doi:10.5688/ajpe79217 .
3. System administration Search Committee Guidelines. University of Colorado Employee Services. Updated January, 2017. Accessed November 19, 2021. <https://www.cu.edu/docs/system-administration-search-committee-guidelines>.
4. Smith Z. The best search committees. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* October 31, 2016. Access November 19, 2021. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-best-search-committees/>
5. Prohibited Employment Policies/Practices. U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. Accessed November 19, 2021.. <https://www.eeoc.gov/prohibited-employment-policiespractices>.
6. Villegas, S., Lloyd, R. A., Tritt, A., & Vengrouskie, E. F. (2019). Human Resources as Ethical Gatekeepers: Hiring Ethics and Employee Selection. *Journal of Leadership, Accountability and Ethics, 16*(2). <https://doi.org/10.33423/jlae.v16i2.2024>.
7. Hagan AM, Campbell HE, Gaither CA. The Racial and Ethnic Representation of Faculty in US Pharmacy Schools and Colleges. *Am J Pharm Educ.* 2016;80(6):108. doi:10.5688/ajpe806108
8. Gallo A. How to conduct an internal interview. *Harvard Business Review* July 13, 2010. Accessed November 19, 2021. <https://hbr.org/2010/07/how-to-conduct-an-internal-int.html>
9. Glassdoor. 11 Must ask behavioral questions. March 11, 2021. Accessed November 19, 2021. <https://www.glassdoor.com/employers/blog/11-must-ask-behavioral-interview-questions/>.
10. Indeed for Employers. 15 Behavioral interview questions to ask candidates. Accessed November 19, 2021. [https://www.indeed.com/hire/c/info/behavioral-interview-questions-to-ask-candidates?gclid=CjwKCAjwrPCGBhALEiwAU19X091SMmbsIjhqQvYgGmORhy55AZfiBTsBehnwo19s2-ruD6UdvToXihoCv-wQAvD\\_BwE&acid](https://www.indeed.com/hire/c/info/behavioral-interview-questions-to-ask-candidates?gclid=CjwKCAjwrPCGBhALEiwAU19X091SMmbsIjhqQvYgGmORhy55AZfiBTsBehnwo19s2-ruD6UdvToXihoCv-wQAvD_BwE&acid)

Table 1. Primary Roles and Responsibilities of Personnel Involved in Faculty Searches<sup>1</sup>

<b>Committee Chair</b>	<b>Committee Members</b>	<b>Hiring Authority</b>	<b>HR Representative</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Serve as liaison between hiring authority and committee members</li> <li>• Facilitate advertising the position description</li> <li>• Schedule and run committee meetings and interviews</li> <li>• Communicate directly with candidates throughout the process</li> <li>• Collate feedback and evaluation data from committee and interviewers</li> <li>• Maintain all records related to search</li> <li>• Assist in checking of references</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assist in identifying qualified candidates</li> <li>• Review application materials for candidates</li> <li>• Participate in screening and onsite interviews</li> <li>• Evaluate and vote on candidates at various stages of the process</li> <li>• Maintain confidentiality of candidates and process</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop formal charge to search committee</li> <li>• Communicate expectations for candidate characteristics, timeline for hiring, and preferred number of candidates to search committee</li> <li>• Check references for acceptable candidates</li> <li>• Extend offers to candidates and negotiate terms of employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide support for recruiting, interview, and hiring processes</li> <li>• Contact candidates that will not be invited for screening interviews</li> <li>• Provide information on types of questions that may or may not be asked during the recruitment and interview process.</li> <li>• Provides awareness of strength and limitations of the HR system and best approaches to attracting or recruiting applicants, including where to advertise the position</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup>Roles and names of these positions may vary based on institutional standards and processes

Table 2. Examples of Behavior or Scenario-Based Interview Questions<sup>9,10</sup>

1. Tell me about a time when you were unable to meet expectations. How did you respond and what would you do differently?
2. Describe a time that you were asked to lead an initiative that went against your values. How did you navigate this process and what was the outcome?
3. Tell us about a time you had to complete a project with limited resources. How did you handle this situation?
4. Describe a time when you went above and beyond expectations. What was the outcome?
5. Tell us about a time when you encountered a conflict with a team member. How did you approach this situation?
6. Describe a time when your leadership was challenged by key stakeholders in the initiative you were promoting. How did you respond?
7. Describe your leadership style, and provide an example where your leadership style has been particularly effective.
8. What is one thing you would have done differently in your professional history?
9. Describe your proudest accomplishment.
10. Tell us about a time when you were under a lot of stress. How did you handle the pressure?