

Looking for the Teacher-Scholar: Mission-based Hiring in a Regional Comprehensive

Elizabeth A. Say and Stella Z. Theodoulou

Abstract

The search for and retention of good faculty is one of the most important tasks undertaken by a university; nothing is more discouraging than when a new faculty member leaves after only a few years. In today's climate of decreasing resources, a college or university must be clear and intentional about its search processes. This essay discusses strategies for successful faculty searches, emphasizing the importance of mission-based hiring.

The search for and retention of good faculty is, arguably, one of the most important tasks undertaken by a university. Much is invested, in terms of time and resources, in conducting a faculty search and nothing is more discouraging than when, having hired the “perfect” candidate, that person leaves in a few years. Sometimes faculty leave for reasons that have little or nothing to do with the institution: a spouse gets a job elsewhere, elderly parents require care, or occasionally someone discovers that the professoriate is not their true calling. Other times, faculty members leave to take jobs elsewhere and there may not be much we can do to change their minds; they are offered higher salaries and/or reduced teaching loads which we cannot match or they have a chance to move somewhere with a significantly lower cost of living (always a challenge for those of us in the greater Los Angeles area). But sometimes their leaving is our own fault. We hired the wrong person and we could have predicted—had we been honest with ourselves—that he or she would not stay.

Since there are so many variables we cannot control, we ought to pay very close attention to the ones we can. In this essay, we will discuss the strategies for hiring faculty that lead to a successful match between the institution and the candidate. In particular, we will discuss how to achieve a “match made in heaven” in a regional comprehensive such as California State University Northridge.

Defining the Teacher-Scholar

Colleges and universities often give lip service to the idea of the teacher-scholar. Administrators at institutions across the country say that they want to hire faculty who are excellent teachers and who will stay on the cutting edge of their disciplines. Living the commitment to the teacher-scholar is sometimes difficult, though, and one must prioritize what is most important to the institution. In order to make good decisions about the faculty we hire, decisions that we can be happy with long into the future, it is important to be clear about the mission of the institution where we work.

Mission-based hiring is about “fit,” and successful candidates are those who can demonstrate the kinds of skills and competencies that make them likely to succeed in the long run at a particular institution, given its mission. The mission of many regional comprehensives is teaching and research; thus, when hiring faculty, teaching and research considerations are coequal. California State University Northridge is a public, urban, comprehensive university (Carnegie Classification Master’s L) that provides undergraduate and graduate education on a campus that reflects the rich diversity of the region. The university is at the forefront of teacher preparation as well as professional programs in California. Our graduates are well prepared to succeed in post-baccalaureate education and to become leaders in their chosen fields.

As a campus, we are serious about the notion of the teacher-scholar, as reflected in our retention/hiring/promotion (RTP) policies. The California State University system is governed by a collective bargaining agreement that articulates (among other things) the expectations for faculty. This document makes it clear that California State University evaluates faculty members in three primary areas: teaching, scholarship, and service. All three are important. On a campus with a strong tradition of faculty governance (such as CSUN), service is an expectation. Additionally, the faculty member has to be both an excellent committed teacher as well as a productive researcher. At CSUN, one cannot be tenured if one is only a great teacher or only a scholar. One must be both.

In many ways, it is more difficult to hire teacher-scholars than to hire faculty whose real professional agenda is research, or whose sole interest is teaching. Most graduate programs at R1 institutions simply do not prepare their graduate students to excel as both teachers and scholars. Let’s be honest: Most graduate programs focus little on training their students to teach. Most graduate programs focus on research and scholarship because those secure the prestige of the graduate program. Graduate students are put into classrooms where they serve as teaching assistants as a way of “earning their keep” as they go through their graduate program. They may give occasional lectures but mostly the T.A. grades papers and exams, meets with discussion groups, and deals with student complaints/concerns. Rarely is there any discussion of “best teaching practices” with the professor the T.A. serves. If one is lucky, the T.A. works with an outstanding teacher and learns by observation. However, since R1s for the most part do not focus on teaching excellence when they hire faculty, it is not a given that the professor one works with is going to be a good teacher. Further, if a graduate student shows promise as a scholar, his or her faculty are likely to discourage him or her from applying for jobs at institutions where teaching is an important part of the job—institutions like CSUN. Rather, he/she will be encouraged to apply for jobs at research institutions.

As we all know, these prized jobs at R1s are few and the competition for them is fierce. It is much more likely that freshly-minted Ph.D.s will find themselves interviewing at small liberal arts colleges, religiously affiliated institutions, or regional comprehensives—all of which have different missions but all of which (usually) place great importance on teaching. Many (though not all) potential faculty thus arrive to interview at an institution unprepared to serve the mission of the institution and,

frankly, largely uninterested in doing so. This is why the hiring process is so critical: We are making decisions that will affect the future of the institution, based on a few hours spent in conversation, a handful of references, and a resume. How do we identify the person who will not only be productive in his or her research program but who is also passionate about teaching, who understands that teaching and learning are primary to the institutional mission, and who has thought clearly about the relationship between work in the classroom and work in research?

The Hiring Process: What We Look For

Cal State Northridge has worked hard to develop a hiring process through which we hire the right faculty for our institution and then retain them into the future. Is the process perfect and does it always work? No. But we have been largely successful over the years and have not hired many faculty members who were not ultimately granted tenure. This is not because our expectations are low: the quality of our faculty speaks for itself. Rather, it is because we are intentional in what we do. The process begins with mandatory hiring workshops for members of faculty search committees, conducted jointly by the office of Faculty Affairs and the Faculty Senate. During these workshops, the “rules of the game” are clearly established and committee members leave with a clear set of expectations as well as a handbook to guide the search process. Additionally, the Educational Equity committee of the Faculty Senate provides guidance on recruiting and retaining a diverse faculty.

The presence of diverse faculty is critical if we are to prepare students for a multicultural society. With diverse faculty, we gain not just role models for our diverse student populations but also a new capacity for cross-cultural pedagogies and dialogue. In order to position themselves to compete for diverse candidates, deans must be able to clearly articulate to search and screen committees the value and the ways in which diverse faculty can contribute to the institution. Sometimes we must realize that different strategies will be necessary in order to encourage diverse faculty to apply for a position. At no time should a dean encourage a search and screen committee to hire a candidate only because he or she would increase diversity. Committees can be encouraged to appropriately recognize and respect race, gender, and ethnic differences of candidates; however, such differences cannot be the sole or primary reason for inviting someone to campus.

From the very beginning of the process, everyone involved must be clear about who we are and who we are looking for. How we decide upon an area of hire at CSUN comes out of a strategic planning process that includes envisioning future hires. All departments submit carefully reasoned plans that demonstrate what future hiring requests will be based on, including data drawn from assessment and program review. Further, departments must explain how position requests support the alignment of mission with actual hiring. We do not hire in a particular area simply because someone with expertise in that area has retired. Departments are expected to demonstrate that there is still a need in that area or to explain why there is no longer a need and provide a rationale for a different area. There is no expectation that every vacant position will

be automatically refilled. Taking the time to carefully prepare a position justification helps insure that the person ultimately hired will “fit” and succeed at the institution. It is no secret to anyone who has been in academe for any length of time that often the faculty themselves are not in accord about who they are looking for or what the departmental and institutional priorities are or should be. These disagreements need to be resolved long before candidates are brought to campus for interviews. There is nothing more uncomfortable than to be the candidate in an interview in which two faculty members argue about the “legacy” of the department over and against the “future of the field.”

Once an area of hire is approved, a position description is developed; here, again, it is important to be forthright. For example, if the normal teaching load is four courses per semester (as it is at CSUN), make sure that information is clear—do not bury the information in the advertisement or make it ambiguous (i.e., “faculty may sometimes be expected to teach four courses a semester”). Similarly, service expectations should be foregrounded: “Faculty are expected to serve on university and department committees and advising is a normal part of the faculty workload.” Other aspects of a campus that may be unique should be described. At CSUN (one of the most diverse campuses in the nation), all position announcements carry a statement to the effect that “the successful candidate will have a demonstrated commitment to working successfully with a diverse student population.” Finally, an explanation of the scholarly expectations should also be part of the advertisement. For example, a recent advertisement for a position in American Indian Studies carried this statement:

The candidate will be expected to contribute to the field through the publication of scholarly and/or policy related articles, participation in professional organizations and/or community network development. The candidate will work closely with other faculty, American Indian students, and community members towards building links between academia and the American Indian community in and around Los Angeles.

If you are honest in your advertising it will save headaches in the end because some—though not enough—people will self-select out and not apply.

The candidates must be screened first on their “paper” qualifications. This requires that we look at their research, credentials, and potential to succeed at the institution. The next level of screening identifies candidates with a teaching approach or philosophy that is compatible with the institutional mission. Additionally those candidates who demonstrate previous teaching experience and articulate an interest in teaching and mentoring undergraduates are rated highly. Applicants whose main teaching interests are advanced graduate seminars do not demonstrate a good fit. In addition, any candidate who was so focused on advancing a research agenda that he or she did not teach as a graduate student should be looked at carefully for fit. The teacher scholar is a candidate who has a clear research plan, presentations, and publications (or the potential to publish), thus demonstrating a commitment to scholarship, as well as a variety of teaching experiences and successively more independent teaching.

Once the initial screening identifies the most promising applicants, they are next interviewed by telephone. Telephone interviews concentrate on the candidates' teaching experiences, philosophy, pedagogy, and ability to teach the current curriculum, including lower-level survey courses. It is important in the phone interview for the candidate to again be reminded of the institution's mission and vision. The interviewer must clearly articulate expectations with regard to teaching and research. It is a good idea to ask candidates directly, "Do you think you can be happy and successful at a campus like ours?" If nothing else, a question like this may give some candidates cause to stop and think about it: "Is this really the right place for me?" The telephone interviews should help to narrow the pool and from this group campus finalists are selected. You cannot guarantee that those who accept the on-campus interview do so understanding the mission, but it is more likely to be the case.

We often have high expectations about how candidates ought to prepare for an on-campus interview, but the committee must also prepare for the interview process. As discussed above, internal debates and disputes should be resolved before meeting with potential colleagues. The department should have a frank and open conversation about what characteristics and qualifications they will be looking for in the candidate and what criteria they will be using to evaluate this. All or most of the faculty in a department ought to be involved in the interview process, if possible. Remember, the candidate is looking you over as much as you are investigating him or her. S/he will want to know if the department is a good fit and this cannot be determined by meeting only the handful of faculty serving on the search committee.

At the same time, it might be wise to keep the department curmudgeons as far away from the candidate as possible. Most departments have at least one of these: the person who is still waiting for Harvard or Yale to call; who—for whatever reason—is dissatisfied with the career choice he made; who bemoans the fact that the "today's students aren't what they were when I started teaching here." You may not be able to stop someone like this from participating in the campus visit, but never leave the candidate alone in a room with him!

Make sure that you establish the various components of the campus interview in advance and let the candidate know what will be expected of him. In addition to the search committee interview, there should also be small-group meetings with department faculty. Lunches and dinners give the candidate a chance to talk with potential colleagues in a more informal and relaxed atmosphere. Research colloquiums are optional but should not be the most important basis of evaluation. A candidate's depth of knowledge and broad research interests can be gauged in the search committee interview as well as in the other small group faculty meetings. Presumably, the search committee has carefully read the materials submitted by the candidate and has looked over writing and research samples.

Given CSUN's mission, the most important basis of our evaluation is the candidate's classroom teaching presentation and his or her articulation of teaching as a component

of his or her professional life. All candidates are told they will teach a class in the invitation to come to campus. They are told what course the class is part of and are sent the syllabus so they can pitch their lectures correctly. Faculty and students attend this teaching presentation. Students, as well as faculty, are surveyed as to the effectiveness of the candidate's presentation. We look for depth of knowledge and communication effectiveness (how interesting it is and how well it gauges and adjusts to the audience's level of knowledge). It is important that candidates convey a particular philosophy or approach, in order to show that they are excellent teachers or have potential, and that they have thought about or had exposure to issues in teaching and learning.

Each candidate also meets with the dean. It is important that this meeting not be simply about the benefits package or why the candidate should come to the institution. The dean's should question the candidate's commitment to the mission, teaching philosophy, and perspectives on being a teacher-scholar and being cognizant of what he or she is looking for in an institution. It is surprising what a candidate will reveal in an interview when queried closely enough: One candidate answered, when asked why he was interested in working at an institution with CSUN's mission, "I probably won't stay here, but it would be okay for a while." Obviously, he was not offered the job!

Making the Right Choice

Having interviewed a number of candidates, the committee must then select the one who not only has all the desired qualities but who also has the elusive characteristic called "fit"—will he or she fit the department and the institution? Will he or she be able to make an academic life at your institution? Often it becomes clear through the interview process that at least one of the candidates is not the right person. But also, often enough, the committee finds that more than one of the possible choices might work out. So now what? This is where the reference checks are invaluable. Candidates usually submit letters of reference when they apply for a job and, not surprisingly, the letters are all what we call "walk on water" letters. No smart person is going to solicit a letter of reference from someone who isn't going to be overwhelmingly positive. It is imperative, therefore, that the committee not rely solely on the letters.

At Cal State Northridge, we are expected to make phone calls to follow up on the reference letters. The committee should speak with the candidate's dissertation chair (if this is a recent graduate) or with a department chair/supervisor if the candidate has been teaching somewhere. Ask if they would hire this person as a faculty member if they had the opportunity to do so. Ask about the candidate's work ethic and ability to get along with others in the department. Explain your institution to the person and ask their opinion about the candidate's ability to succeed on your campus. Can she or he balance both teaching and scholarship? Can the candidate teach four courses a semester and still write and publish? Finally, give the recommender the opportunity to offer information and insight: "Is there anything else you think would be helpful for us to know as we make our decision?"

Having done everything possible to make the right choice, the committee now must choose. They will consult with their colleagues, review the written feedback received from students, compare the information garnered through the phone interviews, and, ultimately arrive at the candidate who seems best suited for the position. At CSUN, the chair of the Search and Screen Committee and the department chair meet with the dean to discuss the various candidates and the committee's recommendation. Often the dean and the committee agree; sometimes they do not, so they negotiate the differences.

Often hiring is a compromise. Sometimes the candidate the department favors will not fit the ideal teacher-scholar type and we must determine how much distance from that ideal we can tolerate. Often when we lose faculty to factors that we cannot control, it is because she or he is far from the ideal and simply cannot make the necessary accommodations. Finally, the dean sends a recommendation to the provost for approval, including recommendations on salary, service credit, relocation expenses, start-up expenses, and so on.

Once the provost approves all the details, the dean will ultimately call and make the offer. This is the last chance to get it right. Pay close attention to all the questions the candidate asks, as well as expectations they reveal and demands. It is surprising how often—even after going through the entire interview process—candidates reveal that they have not been paying close attention. Despite the fact that they have been told repeatedly that at CSUN we teach a four-course load, the first question they often ask is whether the teaching load is negotiable; or they want to know if they really have to serve on committees; or they want to know if we are really serious about our expectations for scholarship. And sometimes in the process of negotiating with a candidate it becomes clear that they actually want to use your offer to leverage a better offer elsewhere.

Conversations should be very clear about what is and is not on the table and about your timeline for a response. Clearly, the candidate has a right to take some time to think about your offer and perhaps compare it to other offers that she has received. But your campus also has a right to expect an answer in a timely fashion. If the candidate turns you down, you want to have time to make an offer to the next person on your list (if you're lucky enough to have more than one acceptable candidate). At the same time, do not get too impatient with the candidate, especially if this is her first job. You are asking her to make a major life decision and at the end of the day, you want her to be happy about it. Also, keep in mind that freshly minted Ph.D.s often go to their graduate faculty for advice about these decisions, and most of the faculty members are teaching in R1 institutions. They are likely to give unrealistic advice and you will need to help the candidate adjust her expectations.

At the end of the process, if you attend to all the details (and with a little luck!), you will have a new member of your faculty who will become part of the academic community, who will inspire your students, who will be an active participant in his department, and who might eventually become a campus leader. None of this happens

by accident and it is a lot of work. Nevertheless, the future of your institution depends on the decisions that are made now. It is well worth the effort.

Author Information

Elizabeth A. Say has been dean of the College of Humanities at California State University Northridge since 2004. Her research and publications are in the areas of social ethics, women and religion, and LGBT studies.

Elizabeth A. Say
Dean, College of Humanities
California State University Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8252
E-mail: elizabeth.say@csun.edu
Telephone: 818-677-3301

Stella Theodoulou has been dean of the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences at California State University Northridge since 2001. She is the author of six books and numerous articles on public sector management and policy.

Stella Theodoulou
Dean, College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
California State University Northridge
18111 Nordhoff Street
Northridge, CA 91330-8256
E-mail: stella.theodoulou@csun.edu
Telephone: 818-677-3317