

# Implementing a Comprehensive Hiring Strategy to Enhance Research Activity: The MizzouForward Initiative

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The University of Missouri (MU) has a long history as a major research institution. It has the Carnegie Classification of Doctoral Universities: Very High Research Activity and has been a member of the Association of American Universities (AAU) since 1908. MU takes pride in its status as the premier public research institution in the state of Missouri and expects its faculty members to be engaged in high-impact research and scholarship. Despite its traditions and expectations, research activity at the institution stagnated in the 2000s. For example, between 2010 and 2015, MU's HERD expenditures were essentially flat (\$239 million in 2010; \$247 million in 2015), while most of its peer institutions experienced much more dramatic increases. MU has experienced a significant increase in expenditures in recent years, with a total of \$332 million in HERD expenditures in 2020. Despite this increase, research expenditures and other important measures of scholarly output at MU lag many of its peer institutions (e.g., other AAU public universities).

To alter the research trajectory of MU, university President Mun Choi in his role as MU chancellor conceptualized the MizzouForward initiative. This initiative contains several components, but its centerpiece is an effort to hire up to 150 new tenured/tenure-track faculty members over the next 5-10 years who will make important contributions to our research mission. These new faculty will be in addition to hires that occur through traditional unit-initiated hiring processes. In the past, MU has attempted to implement centralized hiring initiatives, but nothing close to the scope and scale of MizzouForward. Estimated cost of the overall MizzouForward initiative is \$1.5 billion, with approximately half of these funds earmarked for direct (e.g., salary, benefits, startup) and indirect (e.g., enhanced research facilities and instrumentation)

new faculty support. In this paper, we address details of the initiative, successes and challenges we have experienced, and anticipated future directions.

## **Details of the Initiative**

At MU, the typical hiring process for faculty is one that is like most universities across the country. An academic unit makes a request to the office of the provost for a new position, which includes a strategic rationale for the new position and source of funds for the hire. After the office of the provost approves the request, the unit conducts the search and recommends a candidate, who is approved by department head and dean. The provost or their delegate then provides final approval for the hire. There are several advantages to this traditional hiring model, including units making hires that fill specific needs within schools and colleges

and fiscal accountability in that hires are only made when local resources are available to support them.

A major limitation of the traditional unit-initiated hiring model is that it can be difficult to make focused hires that link to larger university priorities, due to both fiscal and strategic considerations (e.g., hiring units may have limited resources to allocate to new hires; priorities of a unit may not be in full alignment with current university strategic goals). To address these limitations, universities will sometimes engage in centralized hiring initiatives, where a pool of resources is allocated centrally to hire some number of new faculty that align to specific university strategic goals. A common model is a “cluster hire” initiative, where the university devotes a certain amount of money to strategic hires in a specific research area or discipline. MU has attempted more centralized hiring initiatives in the past, with limited success. Factors that inhibited the success of these prior efforts include relative lack of centralized support, over-reliance on coordination among academic units, and lack of clearly defined characteristics of strategic hires.

The MizzouForward hiring initiative differs from these previous efforts in two important ways. First, MU has clear criteria for faculty that are hired through the initiative, namely a track record of significant external funding as a principal investigator. Second, MizzouForward is almost fully funded from centralized resources. In some instances, units may need to provide a portion of support from their own budgets if there are specific candidate needs outside the scope of MizzouForward funding, but most funds for faculty hires and startup will come from central administration.

#### *Criteria for MizzouForward Hires*

MU leadership initially defined three broad hiring areas for the initial stage of the MizzouForward initiative: Next-

Gen Precision Health; New Frontiers in Science, Engineering, and Technologies; and Innovations in Social Science, Humanities, and the Arts. Within each hiring area, we seek candidates who have a demonstrated track record of securing significant external funding as a principal investigator. We chose a track record of major external funding as a principal characteristic of our hires for two main reasons. First, we want to hire researchers whose work is aligned with major national health, scientific, educational, and/or creative priorities, and funding from organizations like the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the Institute for Education Sciences, and the National Endowment for the Humanities is a good proxy for such a link. Second, external funding is a critical institutional metric for universities like MU that are members of organizations like the AAU, and external funding typically drives other important research outcomes like publications and citations.

External funding is a necessary but not sufficient characteristic of individuals we want to consider for faculty positions. Candidates are also evaluated on factors like ability to collaborate with existing faculty, availability of relevant resources and infrastructure, commitment to students, commitment to inclusion, diversity, and equity, and willingness to work effectively in a team environment.

#### *Funding for the MizzouForward Initiative*

As one would expect from a \$1.5 billion initiative, funding for the MizzouForward initiative is derived from several different sources. Some of the funds are already available to the institution, while others are based on anticipated new revenue streams. Historically, MU has had an extremely decentralized fiscal model, where a very small percentage of the overall institutional budget was held centrally. This fiscal model hampered the university’s ability to make major strate-

gic investments and initiatives, as such efforts would often require fiscal support and collaboration from multiple campus entities (e.g., deans of multiple schools and colleges agreeing to support a targeted hiring program). By increasing the amount of funds held centrally, the president has been able to identify sufficient resources to initiate MizzouForward. For example, a higher percentage of funds from sources such as a university system “dividend” that is provided annually to each university in the system, patient revenue from the healthcare system, and general mission support funds are now being directed to support MizzouForward. Anticipated future revenues that will support the initiative include net tuition increases, philanthropic efforts targeted for MizzouForward, and increased state support. In the event of an economic downturn that negatively impacts the university’s finances and/or not realizing anticipated future revenues, specific goals associated with MizzouForward will need to be adjusted (e.g., decreasing the target number of hires). But, existing resources are more than sufficient to initiate MizzouForward, and the anticipated future revenues are based on realistic assumptions and projections.

#### *Recruitment and Hiring Processes*

The recruitment and hiring process for MizzouForward has many similarities to traditional faculty hiring models, but also several important differences. One of the most important differences is that unlike most traditional faculty searches, we use professional recruiters from our human resources team to reach out to potential candidates. Candidates are nominated through a variety of means, and our recruitment team reaches out to nominees to encourage them to consider applying to MU, answer questions about the initiative, and support their application process. Applications that meet our minimum criteria are reviewed by a faculty committee affiliated with one of the

hiring areas, who decide on whether the candidate should be offered an initial virtual interview. Particularly exceptional candidates may be recommended for an on-campus interview without an initial virtual interview. The recommendation from the faculty committee is reviewed by the MizzouForward leadership team, who makes the final decision regarding an on-campus interview in conjunction with the dean and department chair of the candidate’s likely academic home.

Once an on-campus interview has been confirmed, our recruitment team works with the relevant college/department(s) on scheduling the interview. The bulk of the schedule is similar to what one would see in a traditional faculty interview, including a research colloquium, meetings with departmental faculty/staff/students, and meetings with potential research collaborators. In addition, the candidate is scheduled for one-on-one meetings with senior administrators, including the president, provost, and vice chancellor for research. After the visit, the MizzouForward leadership team and relevant dean and department chair decide on whether to pursue an offer and, if so, work with the recruitment team on identifying expectations for salary, start-up, and other relevant needs. Once the parameters of a preliminary offer are in place, the leadership team requests permission from the president and provost to pursue an offer.

In sum, similarities of the MizzouForward hiring process to traditional faculty hiring processes include candidates applying to an open position, initial review by a faculty-led committee, on-campus interviews with relevant constituent groups, and feedback and final hiring decisions being made by an administrative hiring authority after receiving feedback from relevant faculty and department/college administrators. Important differences, though, include using professional recruiters to engage in an active recruit-

ment process, direct involvement of the president and provost in the interview process, and the decision to make an offer and specific offer parameters being directly approved by the president and provost.

### **Successes and Challenges**

Although less than one calendar year old, we can point to several initial successes of the MizzouForward initiative. The most notable foundational success has been our ability to effectively implement a centralized hiring initiative. Such initiatives often fail for a variety of factors, including an unwillingness to persist despite resistance from some campus constituents, lack of funding, and unclear priorities and standards. In our case, the president and provost have been steadfast in terms of their commitment to the initiative, while other MizzouForward staff members have designed and implemented systematic recruitment, interviewing, and hiring processes. A second success is that we have already generated significant interest from many highly qualified candidates. We have had hundreds of nominations and applications from across the country and internationally, and candidates that we interview often cite the institutional commitment associated with MizzouForward as a primary factor for their interest in the university.

Third, we have already hired individuals that we probably would not have been able to recruit via a traditional department-initiated search. Many of our new hires require considerable start-up costs associated with transferring their existing research programs to MU, which likely could not have been met by relying solely on resources at the department/college level. The relatively large, central pool of resources associated with MizzouForward allows us to address these costs, when warranted. Fourth, we have seen a number of units recognize the potential to expand and improve their faculty

ranks via the MizzouForward process, as well as embrace the initiative in an effort to build their own internal capacity. Finally, the term *MizzouForward* has proved to be an effective, concise identifier for new strategic processes at MU. For example, when a senior administrator refers to MizzouForward efforts in some type of communication, the university community knows they are referring to efforts to enhance research activity on campus.

The initiative has not been without its initial challenges. The most salient challenge has been establishing buy-in across campus. Units where external grant activity is low have expressed some resistance to the initiative, as they feel it reflects a lack of institutional commitment toward their areas. While acknowledging the reality of probable hiring areas of the MizzouForward initiative, we regularly remind units that department-initiated faculty searches continue to be approved. We have also experienced resistance from some deans and department chairs who feel they have lost autonomy over hiring processes in their units. Again, we regularly remind deans and chairs that their feedback is a critical component of evaluating the viability of MizzouForward candidates and that we would not hire someone into their units over their objections. However, some of our leaders have yet to fully embrace the opportunities afforded by the initiative.

A second challenge involves skepticism about long-term central funding for the initiative, despite assurances to the contrary and explanations regarding specific sources of funding. A third challenge has been maintaining consistent messaging and decision-making about the outcomes we are trying to achieve with this initiative. For example, we regularly receive inquiries from units about potentially nominating an otherwise strong scholar who has not secured significant external research funding. In such cases, we are consistent in letting the unit know

that the individual would probably not be a successful MizzouForward applicant.

A fourth challenge involves internal administrative capacity, given the degree to which so much of the initiative is centralized. We have had to hire several additional staff in order to manage all of the tasks associated with recruitment (e.g., reaching out to hundreds of nominees and answering inquiries from interested candidates), reviewing applications for minimum criteria and routing to the appropriate review committee, staffing initial interviews, coordinating campus visits with schools/colleges/departments, and assisting with candidate expectations and the negotiation process. Further, several senior administrators devote a high percentage of work hours per week on MizzouForward tasks like deciding on on-campus interview offers, meeting with candidates during their visits, working with schools/colleges on specific offers, and engaging with candidates during the negotiation process.

A final challenge has been the large number of requests for partner/spousal hires. These requests are of course a common challenge in faculty recruitment, but are more prevalent among already established faculty in comparison to individuals who may be coming right out of graduate school or a post-doc. We have already had several cases where our inability to meet the needs of a candidate's partner has been a contributing factor in their decision to not accept our offer.

#### **Future Directions**

Launching the MizzouForward initiative has been a massive undertaking that required coordination across a number of key university entities, including academic affairs, research, finance, human resources, and numerous schools and colleges. We are already seeing bene-

fits from the initiative, in particular many faculty hires that we believe would not have been possible without the initiative. We recognize that MizzouForward will need to evolve over time, as we learn from our initial efforts and consider new strategic opportunities. One future direction of the initiative will be to initiate more targeted hiring areas that take advantage of unique university strengths and/or opportunities. We have begun to implement three such areas: materials science, infectious disease, and a broad school of medicine area, while maintaining our existing initial three hiring areas.

A second future direction will be to continue to enhance buy-in and support for the initiative from the academic units. An initial change we have implemented includes asking department chairs to take more ownership for candidate recruitment (e.g., introducing candidate colloquiums and working with candidates to identify initial startup and salary expectations), and we anticipate exploring additional efforts in the upcoming year. A third future direction involves continually adjusting our messaging campaign to highlight MizzouForward successes. We are in the process of designing a strategy to inform campus of the new MizzouForward hires, as it is important to show that our efforts are bearing fruit. We also continue to evaluate and modify our efforts to promote candidate visits, generate enthusiasm, and present the initiative in the best possible light.

Finally, over time we will assess the research productivity of our MizzouForward hires to gauge the overall success of the initiative. There is no doubt that MizzouForward is a time-consuming, resource-intensive initiative, but we are convinced our efforts will have a transformational impact on MU.