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Hiring Faculty for Mission: A Case Study of a Department's Search

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As Jesuit schools puzzle about their identity, faculty hiring remains a recurring issue. The reason is clear: either Jesuit colleges and universities hire professors who support a Jesuit and Catholic identity, or they gradually will lose this identity and its appeal to prospective students. Yet the choice to hire such professors brings its own problems. Will such hiring for mission lower the quality of the faculty? Will good candidates be scared away? Will ecumenism or diversity be damaged? Are there legal implications? And how can mission-friendly professors even be identified?

In the actual hiring process, more problems emerge. What sort of advertisement should be written? Should issues related to mission be raised by the department or (as is now common) only by a dean or academic vice president? How can the mission affect the initial screening of dossiers and initial interviews with the search committee? If the question of mission is raised just with three or four finalists—often selected solely for professional qualifications—hasn't the whole process simply ignored the issue of hiring for mission? How can departments—who really make the effective

choices—even engage the issue in conversations and meetings?

Within this framework, though without explicating all the issues, the English Department of Saint Joseph's University set out in the fall of 1996 to hire two (later three) new professors. Since hiring for mission is a crucial yet little discussed issue at the department level, we offer here a case study of our own hiring process. We write as three members of a five-person search committee—the three who did the interviewing at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention. I should note that I am a Catholic and a Jesuit priest, while my two colleagues stand in different religious traditions. The chair of the search committee was Owen W. Gilman, Jr., later to be named as the department's new chair.

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The departmental context is important. With fifteen members, the department's senior half was mainly Catholic, with five alumni of Saint Joseph's; the junior half, selected for a needed diversity, was mainly non-Catholic with few Jesuit links. In the summer of 1996, two professors chose retirement or medical leave; a third planned his retirement in 1997. We clearly needed several new professors, and the discussions began.

A department meeting on September 10, 1996, caught the issues: (1) institutional tradition urges a particular consideration for Catholics and/or alumni of Saint Joseph's or other Jesuit colleges; while avoiding parochialism, such a choice could offer our students identifiable role models of Catholic and Jesuit intellectuals; (2) acceptable applicants should sympathize with institutional goals; (3) such sympathy could probably be discerned through the interview process; (4) we would need to determine how our concern should be worded in our advertisement for the *MLA Job List*; (5) the advertisement should not put off viable candidates; (6) at issue is an act of departmental will to preserve institutional tradition; (7) announcing ourselves as Saint Joseph's University in the Jesuit and Catholic tradition would preserve the sense of tradition without eliminating potential candidates from other traditions. After much discussion, our conclusion was unanimous: the advertisement should "identify the institution as Jesuit and Catholic," and of our next several hires, about half should be Catholics and/or Saint Joseph's or Jesuit alumni. Such was the departmental will, and our advertisement read, "Saint Joseph's University . . . an institution in the Jesuit, Catholic tradition"

As the applications rolled in—over 600 Americanists and 150 rhetoric/composition experts—many of us had to read the dossiers, and in a memo the chair of the search committee summarized our need for lively, versatile people who could provide leadership in their fields through 2025, teach creatively and challenge our students, and make significant scholarly contributions to their disciplines. He continued, "As a department, at a meeting in September, we also accepted the goal of addressing the Jesuit mission in education as we consider applicants; consequently, be looking for applicants who already know about Jesuit education by personal experience We also agreed, however, that this particular objective could be met over the course of the next few hires, so we are not restricted in this particular search. We need to read wisely. There are many very talented applicants, from top-notch undergraduate

programs and stellar graduate programs, who have not come out of Jesuit institutions and yet who could be perfectly suitable for the work that must be done here in the next few decades." This was, I thought, a very fair summary of our needs and an open yet balanced statement on hiring for mission.

At the MLA Convention in Washington, D.C., we interviewed about ten people in each field; afterwards, back home in Philadelphia, we met with a few more Americanists. We tried always to put the candidates at ease, while doing highly professional interviews about the normal issues. As for hiring for mission, some candidates raised the issue themselves (they were Catholics, or committed to religion-based education, or wanted to work in the Jesuit tradition, etc.); those who didn't address the issue were asked, "Why do you want to come to Saint Joseph's University?" Some spoke of a smaller school, quality students, good reputation, a strong liberal-arts core, the Philadelphia area, a beautiful campus, a balance between teaching and research, and a commitment to undergraduate education. Others were more explicit about mission and identity: a Catholic and/or Jesuit university, service-learning courses, a commitment to social justice, a care for others, the Jesuit educational tradition, and an interest in "belief and morality as issues." To our pleasure and perhaps surprise, we of the search committee agreed completely on the list of candidates to be invited for on-campus interviews with the full department and with the dean and academic vice president.

At this point—the end of the interviewing process—I end my narration, for reasons of courtesy, confidentiality, and perhaps legal prudence. I note, though, that there was no religious litmus test; rather, hoping within our next several hires to engage a number of Catholics and/or Jesuit alumni, we carefully balanced a number of factors—professional, departmental, institutional, collegial, and personal—while never forgetting our mission and identity. Our process, I believe, may offer help and perspective to other Jesuit colleges and universities in their own hiring.

I end with a story. Last November, at a national meeting on mission and identity in Jesuit education, I spoke of the need for a balanced complexity in faculty hiring. To be complete and honest, I noted that the choice might sometimes involve a Catholic with a good graduate degree and a less committed person with a better doctorate. A former administrator popped up, "Why the Catholic is of course better, for that very reason." My reaction—I was discreet enough not to

express it—was that he epitomized precisely how not to make hiring decisions. Rather, I argue, we need the academic virtues of complexity, balance, frankness, and collegial trust so that we—non-Catholics and Catholics together—might hire with such integrity as to create the future solidly in the Jesuit and Catholic traditions. For that purpose, this case study is offered.

J.J.F

The 1996-97 Search in Historical Perspective

A decade ago, I chaired another departmental search committee, which also happened to involve the rhetoric-composition field. In that search, there was no explicit mandate from the Department regarding particular concern for institutional mission. We still encountered the issue, however, for several applicants had Jesuit college backgrounds, including one graduate of Saint Joseph's. At that time the search committee noted that the department of English already had quite a few members with a home-grown sense of identity—and that the department might be best served by adding people with diverse perspectives, so long as they were comfortable with the particular mission of the institution as we outlined it for them. Consequently, as our deliberations proceeded from initial screening to interviewing about fifteen applicants at the MLA and then on to campus visits, we eventually focused on people who had no prior experience in Jesuit education.

Our other departmental search efforts over the past ten years have similarly not included any strong sense of urgency about adding faculty who would know the nature of the institution in advance through their own educational background. Over time, though, our situation has changed.

Undergraduate institutions with a strong sense of identity and mission have special strengths. There are distinct advantages in having people around who know an institution intimately—and who have a deep love for it. Undergraduates frequently acquire such a love in their years of study and growth at the institution where they matriculate late in their teens. The Department of English at Saint Joseph's University has now reached a juncture where the number of members with long-term affiliations to it will change substantially. This process of change has already begun.

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We currently have broad professional diversity in the Department, a healthy mix of people who prepared for the work of teaching and scholarship in a rich variety of undergraduate environments. Under these conditions, it made good sense in 1996 to give special consideration to the issue of hiring for mission. We recognized the benefits in hiring someone with a strong, abiding devotion to the mission of the institution, although this matter had to be balanced delicately at every step with a host of other objectives and concerns. This past year, we knew all along that we would not compromise on quality, that we would serve the Department and Saint Joseph's poorly if we sacrificed talent simply to bring in someone who had the right religious credentials. As always, in filling each position, we looked for a person who would complement the current members of the department.

In the next several years, we anticipate conducting more searches. To maintain the sort of balance which has served Saint Joseph's well in the past—and to sustain the sense of tradition that a place like this needs to flourish—each search process will incorporate the same judicious approach taken in 1996-97. We aspire to excellence in each search, and we are confident that our future efforts will reflect the same degree of success regarding the hire-for-mission concern which we realized this past year.

O.W.G.

A View from Both Sides of the Interview Table

I am one of the people hired within the last ten years, a period during which, in Owen Gilman's terms, there was no "strong sense of urgency about adding faculty who would know the nature of the institution in advance through their own educational background." Indeed, when I sent in my application to Saint Joseph's, I had only a vague idea that a Jesuit education combined intellectual rigor with humanistic concerns—an idea that has been proved correct during my experience in the English Department here. During my interview at the MLA convention, I was asked no questions about whether I had any devotion to the mission of the University, and, if I had been, I would not have known how to respond.

Thus I came to Saint Joseph's with no actual sense of the Jesuit mission at all. Yet within my very first year

here, I began to see that a sense of mission was an integral part of the intellectual fabric of the University. Quite frankly, I was fascinated at first by the ongoing discussion of mission that I encountered at Saint Joseph's. I had done my undergraduate and graduate work at a large state university and had held a teaching position at another, and in neither place had the issue of mission been broached—not with regard to student needs nor faculty aims. Here the issue was omnipresent, discussed at faculty retreats, student/faculty convocations, and faculty colloquiums. It was the focus of the semiannual "Gatherings" of faculty members from nearby Jesuit institutions. But, perhaps more important, a sense of mission informed the way things were done around here—students' embrace of service-learning courses, the faculty commitment to educating the whole person. Certainly, there was sometimes a gap between articulating the University mission and achieving it, but the very fact that articulating it mattered was impressive.

Although I do not profess to have become an expert on the mission of Saint Joseph's University, by the time I served on the Search Committee I had come to understand it in part. From the perspective of an interviewer, rather than an interviewee, I think that our advertisement in the *MLA Job List*, our initial screening of applications, and our in-person interviews enabled us to strike a necessary balance between attracting and evaluating candidates on the basis of their professional qualifications and on their devotion to the Jesuit tradition. Mission came up in the interviews not as some sort of religious litmus test, but as a way of informing candidates about the University's strong sense of its identity as an institution in the Jesuit, Catholic tradition and inviting them to discuss how their own "mission" might correspond. I think that this search demonstrated—and I trust that future searches will demonstrate—that we had and will have the flexibility to consider alike those candidates trained in the Jesuit tradition and those who, like myself, learn over time to understand and appreciate its strengths.

J.A.P.