

MEMORABLE HIRES: SEASONED BUSINESS FACULTY REFLECTIONS

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Abstract

Selecting new faculty colleagues is an important duty for the members of an academic community. Eight seasoned business faculty members at Christian postsecondary institutions were interviewed concerning their *most memorable hires*. Their recollections were analyzed for possible insights into the connections, if any, between recruiting processes and satisfactory hires.

Selecting faculty colleagues:

Why do some new hires *sizzle*, and others *fizzle*?

Selecting new faculty colleagues is an important duty for the members of an academic community. The individuals chosen influence the status and direction of our department systems, collegial work, classrooms, and future tenure decisions. Faculty searches exact their toll in terms of finances, time and even emotions. Yet some new hires *sizzle*, and others *fizzle*. Volkmann (1993) quoted a dean at a major tier-one university: “I classify staff and faculty in three categories—superstars, journeymen, and duds” (p. 69). Does a common denominator exist between those new hires who will *sparkle* versus those who will *sputter*?

Choosing new colleagues wisely may benefit an academic department in several respects. Teaching effectiveness, student recruitment and retention, productivity, and collegiality are examples of areas in which new faculty members influence their institutions (Guolla, 1999; Davis & Swanson, 2001; Murray, 1999). Conducting searches to fill these positions will be a costly venture in terms of both time and resources.

Dettmar (2004) estimates that, depending on the academic discipline, the sum of the implicit and explicit costs of conducting a thorough search for a tenure-track position could be the equivalent of the first-year salary of that new hire. Academic departments would do well to ensure that they get their money's worth from the employment process. Aside from the advantages to achieving a good fit between the new hire and the department, selecting the right faculty member the first time may prevent repeating the search a relatively short time later. The more limited an institution's resources, the greater the imperative to make the right choice the first time. Each of the institutions in this study would fall into the category of *modest resources* by virtually any relative standard.

Masterson (1999) conducted a case study at Gordon College in Wenham, MA. Gordon College is an evangelical Protestant institution and is a member of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Masterson concluded that in order for faith and reason to be successfully integrated, eight factors must be overtly addressed, including: (1) prudent faculty recruitment and orientation into the organizational culture; (2) a faculty development program that emphasizes ways in which faith and reason can be integrated; and (3) an effective mentoring program for new faculty.

The continued pursuit of the institution's mission and its reputation among its stakeholders is in part a function of the level of commitment of new faculty to the university's core values and vision (Longstreth, 1992; Fowler-Hill, 2001). The importance of this truth is only magnified in an institution that qualifies as *pervasively religious* (Sandin, cited in Hunt, 1998, ¶ 2). For a combination of the reasons explained

above, carefully matching the abilities and desires of the top candidate with the needs and expectations of the institution is an important task.

Perhaps the best indicator of the quality of a postsecondary institution is the caliber of its faculty (Eustace, 1988; Gabert as cited in Winter & Kjørlien, 2001; Jaspers as cited in Eustace, 1988). Halsey and Trow (cited in Eustace, 1988) declared, “In one sense the universities *are* the university teachers” (p. 69; italics in original). This opinion does not appear to be in dispute; the idea that an institution should hire the best possible candidate for a position, based on the school’s finances and reputation, would seem to be rather commonsensical (Eustace, 1988). Perhaps more importantly, how is the word *best* defined? And, as Eustace asks, “best for what” (p. 69)? The literature on the public criteria for identifying the *best candidate* is relatively sparse. Cipriano and Madonia (2006) note, “little research exists to support the work of department chairs and search committees in the process of identifying promising new members of the academy.” One is left to deduce from the qualities of those actually *hired* as to the private criteria of search committees (Eustace, 1988).

At the 2003 Christian Business Faculty Association (CBFA) Conference, Kaupins and Coco presented a paper entitled, “Selecting Faculty For Christian Business Colleges.” Kaupins and Coco note “[m]ost research literature on selection practices has focused on secular associate, baccalaureate and graduate programs” and that, “[r]esearch on Christian business faculty selection has not been as extensive.”

Method

A qualitative study was conducted for the purpose of discovering the *memorable new hire* recollections of colleges of business at selected Christian postsecondary

institutions in the central United States as told by seasoned members of their faculties. Through this study, the collective recollections of these participants were examined in an effort to learn: (a) their perceptions of the *memorable hires*—either positive or negative—within the contexts of the organizational cultures of these colleges of business; (b) if certain recruitment processes and/or criteria led to more desirable appointment outcomes than others; and (c) if some methods of faculty retention are more effective than others.

Seidman (1991) recommended for the sake of anonymity that the specific names of the institutions be withheld or disguised. The names of these institutions were replaced with pseudonyms from the Greek alphabet. Participants and their memorable hires were given pseudonyms that coincided with the institution's assigned letter. A list of these pseudonyms is provided below.

Sites and Participants			
<i>Participant</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>Memorable Hire</i>	<i>Positive or Negative Hire?</i>
Alice Arnold	Alpha University	Annette	Positive
Betty Barnes	Beta University	Bob	Negative
Grace Gibson	Gamma University	Grant	Negative
Elise Edwards	Epsilon University	Eric	Negative
Zared Zimmer	Zeta University	Zach	Positive
Kurt Kurbin	Kappa University	Keith	Negative
Theresa Thomas	Theta University	Tarkis	Positive
Dixie Davis	Delta University	Daniel	Positive

Results and Discussion

The data led to six conclusions that are linked to the review of the literature on the respective topics and enumerated in the paragraphs that follow.

1. *Evidence of an active Christian faith was a strong indicator of the likelihood of a candidate becoming a positive hire at one of the Christian universities included in this study.*

All four of the positive hires were described as possessing and demonstrating a vibrant Christian faith. Of the negative hires, only one was portrayed as a devoted Christian. Two others had apparently confessed adherence to Christianity, but neither of them impressed their respective departments as being faithful to the New Testament charge to “Love each other” (John 15:17, New International Version). The fourth negative hire attended church, but did not even meet the minimum expectation of his institution to be a church member.

Burke (1987) noted that the word *colleague* is derived from the French word, *legere*, meaning “to choose” (p. 47). This linguistic connection lends credibility to the idea that a department’s faculty should select their new colleagues carefully. Marsden (as cited in “The Protestant,” 1996) observed that when Protestant universities diversified their faculty through hiring non-Christians, a generation later they were no longer distinctively religious in nature. Marsden alluded to what could be deemed as a spiritual application of Newton’s first law of motion: “Once a school begins to move away from the religious heritage as a factor in hiring, the pressures become increasingly greater to continue to move in that direction” (§ 2).

2. *Professional references consistently portraying a candidate as a servant leader, ceteris paribus, may be a strong indicator that the candidate should be given strong consideration in the final selection process.*

In as much as it is possible, search committees must check carefully each of the top candidates' references and—as Professor Kurbin suggested—even ask the references for the names of *additional* individuals who could accurately and informatively describe the candidate, especially with regard to the three criteria enumerated above.

The participants agreed that appropriate professional credentials and an abiding Christian faith were the absolute minimum standards for an individual applicant to be considered. Beyond those two basic requirements, the actions of the positive hires that were mentioned most often were (a) demonstrating concern for others, (b) serving as a role model, and (c) exercising a positive influence on colleagues and students. Essentially, these traits are descriptive of what some Christian scholars call the “servant leader” (Swindoll, 1981, p. 16). The model for servant leadership was Jesus: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to *serve*, and to *give* his life as a ransom for many ” (Mark 10:45; emphasis added). Swindoll attested that in this single sentence, Jesus “declares His primary reason for coming . . . to serve and to give” (p. 18).

As to positive self- and other-regard, Jesus identified as the second most important commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39, New International Version). The Apostle Paul wrote that those who love God would be “conformed to the likeness of his Son” (Romans 8:29, New International Version). Thus, those individuals who are devoted to God are consistently serving others and giving of themselves; i.e., they are servant leaders.

In 1991, Charles Colson (former special counsel to President Nixon and founder of Prison Fellowship) and Jack Eckerd (founder of the Eckerd drugstore chain) co-authored a book about reinvigorating the American work ethic. In the chapter, “Working to

Serve,” Colson and Eckerd hypothesized that the type of leadership that will restore the work ethic of the average American employee is “servant leadership” (p. 168). Their definition for this term is a simple one: “doing our very best for others” (p. 168). Max DePree, former chief executive officer of Herman Miller, Inc., identified the ability to “lead through serving” as one of the chief “traits that should be present in all leaders” (1987, p. 125).

Bennis and Nanus (1985) concluded that “positive self-regard” is a significant trait among effective leaders (p. 54) and that an expected consequence of individuals who are led by someone with “positive self-regard” is the development of “positive *other*-regard” (p. 58, emphasis in original). Feldman identified positive other-regard and positive self-regard as characteristics that contribute to being rated as an “effective teacher” (cited in Radmacher & Martin, 2001, ¶ 9).

Among the leadership myths Bennis and Nanus (1985) have sought to eliminate is that all “leaders are charismatic” (p. 207). They posited that some leaders possess charisma and others do not. As a matter of fact, they speculate that “it operates in the other direction; that is, charisma is the result of effective leadership.” Three times, Professor Zimmer stated that Zach was not what would be described as “charismatic,” and yet he was certainly viewed as a leader by his soccer team, colleagues within and external to his department and ZU’s administration. Conversely, the adjectives Professor Gibson used to describe Grant’s personality could be deemed “charismatic,” and yet he was considered by her to be a poor leader. Gibson observed, “Grant didn’t care if he embarrassed you in front of somebody, because *he* was most important and if it was his

mistake, he was *more* than willing to put it off on you.” This type of behavior is the antithesis of servant leadership.

3. *Contingency planning is not optional; rather, it is imperative (i.e., If anything can go wrong, it will—Murphy’s Law).*

Late-resignations in two of the four negative hire cases resulted in an abbreviated search process and undesirable hiring outcomes. Women of a previous generation—i.e., before the dawn of *no-fault* divorce laws—advised their daughters, “Marry in haste, repent in leisure.” The academic equivalent to this situation might be a department that conducts a faculty search in a *rush-to-hire* mode. The department may have become convinced that no affordable alternatives exist. However, Trachtenberg (1993) claimed, “No level of expense is more protracted and painful than that inevitably posed by a ‘successful’ candidate who turns out to be a very *unsuccessful* ‘hire.’” (p. 177, emphasis in the original).

Small institutions might do well to heed Trachtenberg’s prediction and develop suitable contingency plans. By their very nature, small institutions will be perennially at the mercy of what could be called the *steppingstone effect*: late resignations due to current faculty receiving attractive and perhaps last-minute offers from other institutions.

Hiring a replacement in haste may only compound the actual and perceived loss the department experiences. As an alternative, business departments in particular might consider maintaining an up-to-date list of individuals who could serve as either part-time, or interim full-time, faculty. Area alumni, retired faculty, and area businesspeople with appropriate credentials might be considered for such a list.

Even when a department *thinks* it has no other choice but to hire a second-rate candidate—it may not have made a thorough examination of all of the possibilities. For instance, at one institution in this study, the department had not even considered contacting a retired faculty member who still lived in the area to see if he could fill in for just one or two semesters while the department continued to search. The melancholy testimonies of the two participants who experienced the consequences of a hasty faculty replacement are evidence that the hiring of colleagues is too important of a task to be conducted under the pressure of severe time constraints.

4. *Focusing on judgment as opposed to development of new faculty may be the equivalent of establishing a standing search committee and installing a revolving door on the department's conference room.*

All eight of the participants spoke of the importance of effective teaching on the part of faculty within their departments. The negative hire, for example, at Kappa possessed all of the essential characteristics the department and institution required, according to Professor Kurbin, except the fact that he was “a terrible teacher.” Professor Kurbin was asked, “Were steps taken while Keith was here during those five years to try to develop his teaching skills?” Kurbin’s response centered on the feedback Keith had received from student evaluations (conducted every semester in every class) and peer evaluations. Kurbin’s assessment was, “He had plenty of feedback, telling him—from his students—that he wasn’t getting the job done.”

Kurbin implied that Kappa used the student and peer evaluations primarily for summative purposes, not for formative purposes. Rather than the department chair sitting down with Keith, identifying areas in which the evaluations indicated his teaching was

weak, and forming a plan for strengthening those areas, Kurbin indicated that Keith was given the results of the evaluations and told, “You’re not getting the job done.” This approach seemed analogous to a visually impaired individual being instructed to paint a sunset without any description of how a sunset looks. Keith’s situation was the opposite of Robert Helbling’s philosophy at the University of Utah (Eble, 1971). Helbling elected to focus on a “developmental rather than a judgmental system” of appraisal for the faculty. Eble noted, “Preventing faculty deterioration is preferable to trying to cure it” (p. 69).

One reason Keith may have chosen to leave Kappa for the teaching position with a graduate program might have been because he was frustrated at being told repeatedly that he was missing the mark when he did not even know where the target was located. Given that Keith met Kappa’s other expectations of a faculty member—and especially because he taught “in a field that is sometimes difficult for [Kappa] to find good people”—providing Keith with training and/or mentoring would have been a good investment. Based on the information available, had Kappa’s business department provided Keith with the same level of concern for his learning as they did for their students’ learning, he might have developed into a much more productive—and longer-term—member of their faculty.

5. *Concerning organizational culture, success may beget success.*

An organizational culture matrix was constructed and the quadrants were labeled Congenial Culture, Strained Culture, Positive Hires, and Negative Hires (see figure below). Three of the positive hires occurred in departments that were characterized by congenial cultures. The fourth positive hire, Annette, entered a department whose culture

had drifted into a strained situation during the previous year. In Annette’s position as the new department chair, she—in the words of her participant— “really dealt with the negativity,” resulting in, “all the members of the business department work[ing] very well together now.” These relationships suggest that a department with a congenial culture is more likely to have a positive hire experience than is a department with a strained culture.

	Positive Hires	Negative Hires
Congenial Culture	Zeta Delta Theta	Kappa Beta
Strained Culture	Alpha	Gamma Epsilon

At least two possible explanations exist for this alleged relationship. First of all, by definition, a congenial culture would be one where the department’s faculty worked together harmoniously. To continue the musical metaphor, though the individual members might be singing different parts, they would be singing the same tune. A harmonious department may be able to recognize a sour note more readily than a department with a strained culture. Thus, a department with a congenial culture might do a better job of assessing the degree of fit of the prospective candidate(s).

An additional explanation for a department with a congenial culture selecting candidates who become positive hires could be that an individual who meets the criteria of a positive hire is more likely to be attracted to a department that is congenial than to one that appears to be strained. Stein and Caruso (1993) cited items from Matier’s list of indefinable aspects of a job that are important to candidates: “collegiality, congeniality

of associates . . . rapport with departmental leaders . . . ” (p. 148). A qualified candidate who, on the contrary, senses friction between members of the department—or between the department and the administration, for instance—might decide to pursue other options. The survey results obtained by Kaupins and Coco (2003) indicated that organizational culture was the “top rated institutional aspect desired” when attracting Christian business faculty to their current positions.

6. *Students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of a professor’s teaching may begin outside of the classroom.*

Professor Barnes identified a desirable faculty candidate as one, “who likes college-age kids; just plain likes being with them, being around them.” Of the four positive hires, three of them were described as being very involved in a particular extracurricular activity with students. This connection would be consistent with Hart and Driver’s (cited in Radmacher and Martin, 2001) findings that teachers who are perceived by their students as extroverted receive higher effectiveness ratings than do introverted teachers. The research of McCrae and John (cited in Radmacher and Martin, 2001) indicated that extroversion is defined by “such components as affiliation, positive affectivity, energy, warmth, and gregariousness” (¶ 8).

Axelrod (1973) declared that for teaching to be raised to the level of an art, the professor must establish “relationships with students that are of a different sort from those that students enter into with the professor who is a lecturer” (p. 229).

Extracurricular activities facilitate the process of students coming to recognize that the faculty member is a real person who is interested in them as more than a receptacle into which knowledge is to be poured. Churukian and Feldman affirmed this relationship in

their respective studies which indicated that “the more accessible an instructor is in sharing . . . personal time outside the classroom, the more effective the instructor (cited in Thompson, 2001, ¶2). Search committees might benefit from looking for information related to student extracurricular activities on a prospect’s vita and/or asking the candidate about experience in this area.

Implications for Faculty Employment Practices of Christian Institutions

If recruiting faculty who will fit appropriately at secular institutions is important, then the task for denominational colleges is even more so. The missions of postsecondary schools that meet Sandin’s criteria of “pervasively religious” (cited in Hunt, 1998, ¶ 2) are by definition going to be more focused than those of secular colleges. If the results of this study come close to being representative of other Christian universities, then as a whole, these institutions are faring no better in recruiting faculty who fit well than the general postsecondary school population (Burke, 1987). These institutions are tuition-driven and heavily dependent on their financial benefactors. As teaching institutions, the issue of faculty fit maybe a key to their survival. Bearing those concerns in mind, the following is a list of implications for these types of universities.

1. *Get your own house in order first.*

Based on the hiring comparisons between cultures that were congenial versus those that were strained, a department should attempt to resolve any issues or power struggles between faculty members (or between the department and the administration) before the search process begins. Tension within the department may adversely affect the appropriate formation and effective operation of a search committee. Additionally, a

sense of conflict within the department may send an appealing candidate straight to the nearest exit.

2. *Very few important decisions in life must be rushed, and hiring a full-time faculty member is not one of them.*

Small institutions need to recognize late resignations as a normal occurrence for which their departments must prepare contingency plans—particularly a registry of potential adjunct faculty. These contingency plans should be reviewed annually, at the minimum.

3. *What transpires in the days and weeks prior to the candidates' visits to the campus may be at least as important—if not more so—than the actual interviews.*

Examples of activities that should be completed in advance of the interviews are: (a) thorough reference-checking; (b) careful reading of the candidates' vitas and other materials submitted; and (c) the thoughtful development of questions for the candidates. Cipriano and Madonia (2006) suggest that a set of “universal questions” to be asked of each candidate should be established in advance.

4. *Rookie faculty would likely benefit from access to: (a) a personal trainer; (b) participation in a training camp; or (c) both.*

The four negative hires in this study were in their first full-time faculty positions. For three of the four, their greatest weakness was their lack of teaching ability. The fourth individual, Grant at Gamma, was lacking in appropriate leadership skills and in appreciation for the organizational culture of the department and the institution.

Proficiency in an academic subject is not synonymous with effective teaching skills. Block (1993) called it “a crime and a disgrace” that he and thousands of other Ph.D.s

have been “set loose upon an unsuspecting student population, without having had a single shred of training” in the area of classroom teaching (p. 531). Especially at institutions that emphasize teaching to a greater degree than research, if a new hire is inexperienced in teaching, appropriate training and/or mentoring should be provided during the first year of appointment. Such training/mentoring may benefit not only the new hire, but possibly the institution as well by improving collegiality, retention and the long-run satisfaction and productivity of their faculty (Pierce, 1998).

Orientation for new hires is also important as it relates to instilling a sense of the organization’s culture. An organization’s culture could be thought of as its collective values, norms, traditions and attitudes (Gitman & McDaniel, 2003). These characteristics serve as a backdrop for interpreting experiences and initiating actions on an organizational, unit, and/or individual basis.

5. *Learn the basics: Faculty Search 101.*

None of the eight faculty members interviewed mentioned any type of training that their institution provided to search committee members. Dettmar (2004) admits that in 15 years of academe—including positions as associate dean and department chair—that he has had “not one hour of formal training in the best practices for hiring.” If Cipriano and Madonia (2006) are correct in their assertion that “the two most critical decisions a university makes are who to hire and who to tenure,” then it seems at least a modicum of training for the former endeavor would be appropriate.

6. *The mission is paramount.*

The interpretation of the data collected from participants at Beta, Gamma and Epsilon indicated that the negative hires at these institutions were pegs hired to fill holes. The

missions of the respective institutions did not play a leading role in these productions. Inquiry into teaching effectiveness and spiritual devotion on the part of the new hires were probably surface-deep at best.

Southern Baptist universities, for example, exist for one reason: to provide quality higher education from a Christian worldview. The mission statements of many of these institutions, as well as other Christian universities throughout the United States, might include the characteristics of Christ-centeredness, servant leadership and faith integration. When universities hire faculty, they must do so based on the expectation that the candidates are willing and able to accomplish the respective institutions' mission. In the words of Richard Irish (cited in Volkmann, 1993), when interviewing a candidate, it is of vital importance to discern if the person is looking for a "mission" or a "meal ticket" (p. 82).

Recommendations For Further Study

1. *Ask two participants about the same hire.*

Comparing the memory and description of the same hire with two veteran faculty members might yield some interesting observations. For instance, one of the participants in this study confided that three years after his stormy departure, a current member of her department still thinks the person she identified as a negative hire "walks on water."

2. *Study other private institutions.*

Whether universities that are both secular *and* private have a similar or different track record than institutions that are one or the other might be interesting to investigate.

3. *Conduct a quantitative study.*

Initially, this study was planned to utilize the quantitative method. That format was abandoned based on the difficulty of constructing a survey instrument that included the proper scope of variables. Having completed the study using qualitative methods, a better survey instrument could be designed and sent to a larger and random sample of institutions.

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