

The Diversity Question and the Administrative-Job Interview

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February 17, 2017

With Support From

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Search committees have a list of six to 10 usual questions they ask every candidate interviewing to be a department chair or dean. There is the icebreaker question ("What attracts you about joining us here at Prairie Home University?"), the leadership question ("How do you deal with conflict?"), and the fund-raising question ("What is the largest private gift you have asked for and received?").

But of all the questions asked and answered, the one that has proved to be the most complex is the diversity question.

It's posed in any number of ways, and produces just as many different answers. Over the last decade I have participated — on both sides of the hiring table — in many job interviews via phone (increasingly rare), online (increasingly common), in airport hotels, and on campuses. My goal here is to offer advice first to hiring committees about how best to ask the diversity question, and then to candidates about how best to answer it.

Before the question is asked. How an interview will work out begins with the preparation of the job ad. A committee should, if at all possible, avoid cutting and pasting the institution's official statements on diversity and inclusion into

the job ad. Do that, and the institution will sound lawsuit-proof, perfunctory, and compliant rather than convincing, sincere, and inviting. Does anyone really believe that "Prairie Home University is a Title IX/AA/EEO employer" successfully communicates an institution's genuine desire for inclusive excellence?

I recommend you restate the (probably mandated) formula in your own words. For example: "We here at Prairie Home University are convinced that being around people who are different from us [makes us more creative](#), more diligent, and harder working." The best candidates will measure your commitment to diversity by the way you express it. What's more, even if current federal and state laws on diversity may, in time, come under political attack and be changed, statements like this one (which doesn't even contain the word "diversity") may be able to survive and continue to express a department's or a college's sincere desire for inclusive excellence.

Who asks the question? When a search committee distributes its list of interview questions among members, guess who will almost automatically be tapped to ask the diversity question? That's right: the person who represents some kind of diversity.

That can be a bad idea for several reasons. The (perhaps lone) faculty member representing underrepresented minorities on the search committee may actually want to ask a different question, one related to that person's background and area of expertise (leadership, community relations, fund raising). People shouldn't feel obliged to always represent that one aspect of themselves.

Second, a minority candidate watching the lone minority on the committee ask the diversity question sends a signal that, if hired, this applicant will be burdened, too, with dozens of future tasks on committees — not because of any subject-matter expertise, but because of his or her race/ethnicity.

Finally, if the committee's lone minority member asks the diversity question to nonminority candidates, that may increase their unease about answering on this topic. After all, you may imagine that whatever you say may well affect the colleague personally, not just professionally. In one case, I saw a minority colleague on a search committee looking at candidates very intently, stating: "As you can imagine, I am strongly interested in increasing diversity at Prairie Home State." Several of the job candidates visibly winced at this rather direct approach.

There are no easy solutions for this sensitive situation. I recommend creating a clear awareness of these potential reactions before the search process even starts. It's a good idea for committee members to participate in workshops on implicit/unconscious bias in preparation for a search. Some institutions — including the [University of Connecticut](#), [Humboldt State University](#), and [Michigan Tech](#) — require anyone serving on a search committee for staff, faculty, and administrator positions to attend workshops on bias. After all: (a) Everyone harbors biases; and (b) all of us need to be reminded, periodically, to be aware of our biases. Even better, of course, is when faculty and staff volunteer for such workshops and embed them in their more comprehensive discussions about a department's values, atmosphere, and hiring.

How not to answer. So you're a candidate for an administrative search and someone has asked you some version of the diversity question. Do yourself a favor and avoid giving a prerecorded answer. More often than not, such a "safe" strategy will mean you fail to actually answer the specific question you've been asked.

For example, when a colleague from a West Coast institution was asked what specific steps he would take to increase diversity at a predominantly white and male college, he responded: "Diversity isn't really a big deal for me. At my university, only 35 percent of instructors are white." While his response seemed at least to hint at the candidate's ability to collaborate with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, his answer sounded evasive and provided no evidence that he would be able to solve the hiring college's own lack of diversity.

A second canned answer to avoid is the grizzled cliché used (with deliberate irony) by the author Tanner Colby as the title of his 2013 best-selling book, [Some of My Best Friends Are Black](#) (a play on Robert Gessner's 1936 classic, *Some of My Best Friends are Jews*). If that type of answer is in your repertoire — surprisingly often, male candidates

advance it with a hefty dose of righteous emotion — understand that it will anger at least some members of the search committee. Not only does it fail miserably at suggesting a systemic approach to increasing diversity, but it reminds your audience that having a black or Jewish friend or two is not incompatible with holding racist views about entire social groups (as [Mary R. Jackman and Marie Crane](#) have demonstrated as early as 30 years ago).

Finally, do yourself a favor and don't insult the search committee by using your answer to advance some bit of information you've just gleaned from a cursory reading of a recent newspaper or magazine article. Candidates sometimes rely on that strategy to exhibit familiarity with what's in the news, but any follow-up questions by committee members will reveal the superficial quality of your knowledge. A committee dedicated to hiring administrators who will make a difference in the area of diversity will want to hear much deeper engagement with the topic.

How to answer. There really is no reason to answer the diversity question any differently than you would the other questions during a job interview: Be honest and accurate about your background.

If you have prior experience on diversity issues in academic administration, be prepared to describe it. Let your committee know that you: established an award recognizing work on diversity issues, raised money to lower the financial drawbridge for minority students, or increased the diversity of your faculty. And be ready to discuss specific examples, processes, and outcomes of such activities. And if you have broader social and cultural credos to share, feel free to do so. Most search committee members will welcome your sincere support for an equitable and just intellectual environment in higher education.

What if you don't have any administrative experience on diversity work? That complicates your response. You are already at a disadvantage when it comes to competing with candidates who can point to past achievements while you can only project what you intend to do in the future.

I found myself in that situation some years ago, and I settled on a solution that was well received by search committees. Instead of dwelling on eventualities and future plans, I spoke about the presence of diversity throughout my entire record of scholarship and teaching — from my first published essay on gender neutrality in modern dictionaries of English to a recent research project on the interplay of race and medievalism in Atlanta.

I was able to claim, with specific examples, that my sustained interest in diversity was at least as predictive of my future actions as other candidates' relatively recent administrative actions.

What if you don't have that sort of research background, either? Then show how you observed, and learned from, administrators around you: Select two or three specific examples of projects your chair or dean employed to further diversity in some way, and be sure to comment on the processes they used, and which ones worked, and which didn't. This sort of response may not be the most impressive one a committee will hear, but it will show you've thought about the issue.

Why the diversity question is essential. Unlike [major corporations](#), which have made diversity and inclusion a priority to attract the best talent and remain globally competitive, colleges and universities have been astonishingly slow about such change, especially in the area of administrative hires.

As Jerlando F.L. Jackson, a professor of higher education and director and chief research scientist of Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, noted in [his 2015 essay](#) in *The Atlantic*: "Many institutions tend to focus [on students] and, in some cases, faculty, but very few" pay attention to the administration.

Asking and answering the diversity question carefully and sincerely is an important step toward making sure we hire a more diverse administrative work force in academe — or at least an administrative work force wholeheartedly dedicated to diversity and inclusion. That will lead to progress at all levels of the institution.

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