The Case for Cluster Hiring to Diversify Your Faculty

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By Carla Freeman

The numbers are striking: Within just three years, the College of Arts and Sciences at Emory University has more than tripled the proportion of faculty hires from underrepresented minority groups. How? We took many steps, but a key one was the increasingly popular, yet controversial, strategy of "cluster hiring."

As a new hiring season gets underway across academe, we all are determined to diversify our faculties — both to meet student needs and to better reflect the full spectrum of American society. Most important, we know that diversity is a critical element in undergraduate education, research, scientific discovery, and artistic expression.

Year after year, institutions have announced bold diversity plans and ambitious hiring goals. Yet year after year, most of us have failed to move the diversity needle more than small, incremental steps — even with vast resources committed to broadening candidate pools and diversifying the Ph.D. pipeline.

That was true at Emory until we accelerated and broadened our tactics. We used target-of-opportunity hires. We identified key fields in which underrepresented faculty were concentrated. And we turned to cluster hiring.

By way of illustration: In the three years leading up to our cluster-hire experiment — between 2014 and 2017 — Emory hired a total of 65 tenure-track faculty members, only 15 percent of whom were from underrepresented groups (in STEM fields that designation includes women of all racial and ethnic groups). But between 2017 and 2019, after adding cluster hiring to our other efforts, we've recruited 80 new tenure-track faculty members, 51 percent of them (or 41 hires) from underrepresented groups.

So what exactly is cluster hiring? The concept is neither new nor revolutionary. It is an aggressive approach to capture large and diverse pools of candidates who bring with them impressive research and teaching portfolios. While increasingly common, it is not without opposition or challenges.

Cluster hiring can take multiple forms, but its goals and general structure are straightforward: Prioritize and invest in multiple positions in a broad field, or across a range of related fields, rather than hiring faculty members one by one in specific subfields. This increases the likelihood of a diverse pool of candidates, identifies synergistic connections among candidates and, by recruiting faculty cohorts together, fosters collaboration and a shared experience.

Cluster hiring is not the single ticket to successful faculty diversity. To be clear, cluster hiring entails labor-intensive, emotionally sensitive, and time-consuming work. It is work that also represents a sea change in the intentional — rather than passive — approach to diversifying the faculty.

Like most such institutional innovations, cluster hiring takes a variety of forms, and may differ even within a single university. Within the arts-and-sciences college at Emory, we have experimented with three different genres of cluster hires. The specifics of each differ greatly, but the process and outcome of each type have provided some valuable lessons.

Diversity statement, then dossier. Our first cluster hire took place in 2016-17 and involved an open-rank, open-field search across eight STEM units in the college, with more than 30 professors serving on various departmental search committees. It proved to be one of the most ambitious faculty recruitment efforts we had ever undertaken.

Here's how it worked: We prioritized the recruitment of top scientists who had demonstrated their commitment to working with minority students. How? We required candidates to write a statement about their experience with, and vision for, mentoring students from underrepresented backgrounds. Whether we reviewed the candidates' scholarly dossiers was conditional upon the strength of these statements.

Only candidates with compelling mentoring statements progressed to the next stage of review, where research excellence was assessed through the traditional CV benchmarks: publications, grant funding, scholarly independence and impact, and other factors.

In total, this search attracted more than 1,000 applicants. We ended up hiring seven new faculty members — four on the tenure track and three on the lecture track — with excellent records of mentorship, teaching, and scholarship. Moreover, we identified other candidates in the pool for positions outside of the formal cluster hire.

By foregrounding diversity in our recruitment, we attracted a pool of candidates that was both diverse and academically exceptional. The strength of that pool convinced some faculty skeptics that "diversity" and "excellence" were not competing priorities.

Indeed, the search process profoundly influenced how our departments hire in general. As a result of the success of our first cluster hire, we now require all faculty job candidates in every arts and sciences search to write a statement describing their experience and vision for mentoring underrepresented minority students. That practice signals — both to candidates and to our own faculty — the university's central commitment to diversity.

Field-specific cluster hiring. A year ago, turning our sights toward the social sciences and humanities, we rolled out two other genres of cluster hires:

- One search in the history department aimed to recruit a cluster of three assistant professors whose work focused on the history of race and ethnicity in the United States. While enrollment declines in the field mean many history departments nationwide are worried about losing faculty positions, this subfield continues to expand in scholarly richness, faculty diversity, and student interest. We hired three tenure-track faculty members from a pool of 545 applicants.
- A second ambitious cluster hire focused on the interdisciplinary field of Latinx studies. Students and faculty alike had voiced strong desires for new course offerings, better mentoring, and scholarly leadership within this growing interdisciplinary field. Eleven humanities and social-science departments were eager to participate. We hired three senior faculty members in Latinx studies, from a pool of more than 300 applicants. Even for departments whose recruiting was unsuccessful, the search highlighted the vibrancy and importance of this growing field.

How did we convince the skeptics? These successes did not happen without some instances of miscommunication, mistrust, and skepticism.

Logistically, it was challenging to coordinate a complicated recruitment process with so many departments — not to mention trying to involve a broad mix of people in the candidates' campus visits (when each followed a different schedule). Our efforts to communicate clearly and deal with emerging concerns were sometimes imperfect.

The amount of faculty time and effort required for cluster hiring cannot be underestimated: More than 30 professors participated on search committees for the STEM cluster hire, and at least another 30 for the Latinx-studies search. The sheer scope of multiline searches means that cluster hiring entails a heavier lift than the traditional search process. No doubt that level of effort posed some frustrations, especially when there was no hire at the end of it.

Early on, some faculty skeptics questioned the role of the dean in setting diversity as an explicit goal, when they "simply wanted to hire the best scientists." Others were uneasy about the competitive dynamic of so many departments eager to hire — when the administration had only promised three faculty lines.

Those reservations have been largely put to rest. The fact that the college was able to authorize a greater number of offers than initially planned — seven instead of three — helped to soothe tensions and convey the administration's commitment on this front.

One ingredient that was essential to our hiring success and to broad-based faculty support: Even when the cluster hire crossed disciplines, we organized search committees at the department level.

In the STEM cluster hire, our initial plan was to signal its high priority by naming each of the eight department chairs involved to make up the formal search committee. That idea was revised for two reasons. First, one glance at the potential lineup showed that we would be contravening our own internal goal to create diverse hiring committees. Moreover, earning the trust of departments and programs requires empowering them to lead from the very beginning and consult with the administration throughout the process.

Instead, we asked each of the eight departments to form a small search committee and collaborate with the other panels. Here, again, maintaining consistent, open channels of communication proved critical to building trust and winning over the initial skeptics.

The upshot. Our experiments with cluster hiring generated intense excitement, with professors across the college eager to collaborate on these searches. This method of hiring has demonstrated that academic excellence can, and must, be achieved by deliberately diversifying the faculty, and by intentionally adopting vigorous, expansive, self-reflective, and critical means by which to do so.

We recruited superb new scholar-teachers, yes. But in addition, the act of hiring them together, as clusters, promises to enhance their experience as individual faculty members. Being part of a cluster — whether within a single department or across disciplines — can mitigate the isolation often felt by people from an underrepresented demographic on the campus. Together, these clusters begin to change the conversations and enrich departmental and campus culture more generally.

We've also designated financial and other resources for these new hires to use collectively or individually in support of their scholarly, pedagogical, and mentoring efforts. Such activities are understood to be formal service contributions, and be recognized in their annual and promotion-related reviews.

Successful cluster hiring requires significant money, forethought, energetic outreach, deep and broad-based collaboration, and meticulous adherence to the very best hiring practices. We are far from reaching our faculty-diversity goals; some fields remain particularly challenging. But by applying what we have learned, acknowledging the missteps and the successes, and extending these recruitment lessons into the full scope of academic life, we hope to make a difference in faculty well-being and retention.

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