

The Current University Faculty Hiring Process is Woeful, Grueling, and Broken in the United States

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Abstract: Faculty hiring is consequential and legitimately selective, but selectivity does not require a process that is protracted, interview-heavy, opaque, or weakly structured. This critical integrative review examines faculty hiring from the applicant's perspective and asks when procedural complexity stops improving judgment and instead becomes a barrier to employment. These burdens occur in a labor market organized around an annual academic cycle, making delay unusually consequential because one unsuccessful season can postpone access to comparable tenure-track opportunities for many months. The literature further shows that vague criteria, prestige dependence, unstructured interviews, committee homophily, rank dynamics, and subjective judgments of fit can undermine comparability and amplify bias. The central argument is that faculty hiring becomes institutionally broken when applicant costs grow faster than the decision-relevant information produced and when committees retain substantial discretion without equivalent procedural safeguards. The article proposes a more defensible model based on pre-committed criteria, progressive application requirements, fewer evaluative stages, standardized interviews and campus visits, trained and diverse committees, prompt communication, and post-search accountability.

Keywords: Faculty Hiring, Academic Job Market, Faculty Applicants, Search Committees, Interview Burden, Hiring Bias, Organizational Culture, Equitable Hiring

Introduction

Faculty hiring is a gateway to long-term academic employment, but the selection process can itself become an obstacle to entry. Applicants commonly prepare institution-specific dossiers, coordinate confidential recommendations, wait for decisions across several months, and then move through remote screening and intensive campus evaluation. Fernandes et al. (2020) documented 7,644 applications from only 317 respondents in one hiring cycle, while Leibowitz (2023) described individual faculty searches for one position at a highly selective university drawing roughly 150 applicants and, in broad searches, more than 400. These figures show a market in which committees face legitimate screening pressure, but they also reveal the scale of uncompensated labor borne by candidates. The relevant question is therefore not whether faculty hiring should be demanding; it is whether the demands imposed on applicants are proportionate to the quality of evidence universities actually obtain.

Length and complexity are often mistaken for rigor. A multi-stage process may appear careful because it contains more documents, interviews, meetings, and approvals, yet each additional stage also creates another opportunity for inconsistent questions, informal impressions, prestige cues, and cultural similarity to influence judgment. The faculty-hiring literature identifies recurrent risks including elitism, affiliation bias, cloning, first-impression effects, shifting standards, and vague notions of fit (Culpepper & O'Meara, 2021). When such risks operate within committees that have broad discretion and unevenly distributed power, procedural elaboration can increase noise rather than accuracy. Thus, a rigorous search should be defined by the relevance, comparability, and transparency of its evidence, not by the number of evaluative encounters a candidate survives.

This article advances an applicant-centered critique of faculty hiring. It argues that the process becomes institutionally broken when it combines high applicant burden with slow decisions, redundant interviewing, opaque or mutable criteria, and organizational cultures that permit subjective judgments to substitute for job-relevant evidence. This formulation does not assume that every search is dysfunctional or that every committee acts unfairly. Rather, it treats bias and inefficiency as predictable process risks that should be constrained by design. The analysis

therefore shifts attention from how applicants can better endure the academic market to how universities can build a selection system that deserves the labor, trust, and career stakes applicants invest in it.

Problem Statement

Recruitment represents a substantial organizational investment, with human resources recruiting expenditures estimated at approximately \$200 billion annually (Bell, 2018). Yet the financial consequences of ineffective hiring extend well beyond the initial costs associated with attracting and selecting employees; approximately 34% of employees leave their organizations within their first year, illustrating the potentially significant consequences of poor hiring decisions and weak employee–organization alignment (Bell, 2018). These challenges are amplified within an increasingly mobile labor market, as more than 28% of Americans have reportedly engaged in job-search activity, creating greater competition among organizations for qualified candidates (Robinson, 2025). Collectively, these conditions suggest that organizations cannot afford hiring systems that are unnecessarily prolonged, poorly structured, or incapable of identifying and retaining appropriate talent. Accordingly, improving the efficiency, transparency, and quality of recruitment and selection processes should be viewed not merely as an administrative priority but as a consequential organizational strategy for reducing hiring inefficiencies, improving candidate experiences, and strengthening long-term workforce stability.

Faculty applicants encounter a selection system in which substantial effort frequently produces little transparency or closure. Fernandes et al. (2020) found that 317 applicants submitted 7,644 applications, completed 1,637 off-site and on-site interviews, and received 359 offers; 42% of respondents received no offer, and 57% of applications received no response. At the same time, faculty advertisements may leave preferred qualifications underspecified, while committees rely on internal criteria that applicants cannot see (Fernandes et al., 2020). This opacity is consequential because faculty evaluation is vulnerable to prestige, network affiliation, cultural similarity, stereotypes, and shifting standards (Culpepper & O'Meara, 2021). The problem is therefore not competition alone. It is a process-design problem in which prolonged and repeated evaluation can impose major applicant costs without reliably ensuring structured, comparable, or equitable decisions.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry study is to examine the principal barriers faculty applicants face in obtaining academic appointments and to explain how those barriers are produced by the architecture of the hiring process. The analysis focuses on four connected problems: the annual timing of tenure-track hiring, excessive process duration and interview burden, weakly structured evaluation by search committees, and organizational cultures that normalize prestige dependence, subjective fit, or inequitable deliberation. The review also identifies practical reforms that can reduce applicant burden while strengthening decision quality.

Significance Statement

This analysis is significant because unsuccessful faculty applicants are often encouraged to interpret rejection as evidence of insufficient productivity, preparation, or personal competitiveness even when the decision process is opaque. Fernandes et al. (2020) found that conventional scholarly metrics did not fully explain offer outcomes, and the broader faculty-hiring literature demonstrates that evaluators can be influenced by criteria unrelated to direct job performance. A process-focused account therefore changes the locus of responsibility: applicants remain responsible for presenting strong evidence, but universities are responsible for ensuring that the evidence requested is necessary, the criteria are stable, the comparisons are fair, and the timeline is professionally managed. This distinction is particularly important for candidates with fewer financial, geographic, caregiving, or institutional resources to absorb another lengthy search cycle.

Applicant Burden in an Annual Labor Market

The first barrier is the cumulative labor required simply to remain competitive in the academic market. Faculty applications often require tailored cover letters, research statements, teaching statements, diversity or inclusion statements, CVs, and confidential recommendations, even before a committee has determined that an applicant is viable. In the Fernandes et al. (2020) sample, the median applicant submitted 15 applications, making the application process a repeated production task rather than a single employment transaction. When institutions demand extensive customization at the initial stage, they transfer substantial screening costs from the university to candidates whose probability of receiving serious review may be low. A more defensible process would therefore request only the materials necessary for the decision being made at that stage.

Seasonality makes those costs more consequential than they would be in a continuously hiring labor market. The supplied faculty-hiring materials describe a typical cycle in which tenure-track advertisements appear primarily in the fall, committees review files through late fall and winter, campus interviews occur in winter and early spring, offers are made in spring, and appointments begin the following academic year. A candidate who misses the principal posting window or loses several late-stage searches may find that comparable openings do not reappear until the next cycle. The annual structure therefore converts procedural delay into career delay: weeks lost inside a search can reduce the number of viable alternatives available before the market closes. The annual bottleneck also distributes risk unequally. Candidates with secure postdoctoral appointments, research funding, schedule flexibility, and strong institutional sponsorship are better positioned to finance another year of waiting than applicants managing contingent teaching, living expenses, visa deadlines, or geographic constraints. Fernandes et al. (2020) identified family, dual-career, citizenship, and related circumstances among the obstacles applicants perceived in the market. Formal equality in application requirements therefore does not guarantee equal access to the process. When a search consumes months and then ends without timely closure, the institution may impose a much larger opportunity cost on candidates who have the least capacity to absorb delay.

Communication failure magnifies the burden because uncertainty prevents applicants from making rational career decisions. Fernandes et al. (2020) reported no response for 57% of the applications in their dataset that applied for academic job roles. Those results outline that silence for almost 6 out of 10 of those who apply leaves candidates unable to determine whether they remain under consideration, whether to accept another position, whether to renew a lease, or whether to commit to another academic year elsewhere. Detailed feedback after every rejection may be unrealistic, but basic status communication is not. A professionally managed search should close the loop because the absence of communication converts institutional delay into applicant uncertainty without adding any decision-relevant information.

When Rigor Becomes Process Excess: Duration and Interview Proliferation

The second barrier is the duration of the selection process itself. Fernandes et al. (2020) describe applicants waiting as long as several months for interview contact, followed by remote screening and one- or two-day campus visits. Faculty searches require consultation, but consultation can become process inertia when responsibilities, decision dates, or approval sequences are unclear. The distinction matters because a long search can appear thorough even when much of the elapsed time reflects scheduling delays rather than deeper evaluation. Search duration should therefore be justified by identifiable decisions, not by the assumption that academic hiring naturally requires most of an academic year.

Interview proliferation creates a related problem: universities often treat a campus visit as one interview even though applicants experience it as many separate evaluative encounters. A finalist may complete a research seminar, teaching demonstration, chair interview, dean interview, student meeting, meals, and repeated one-on-one conversations with faculty. In the Fernandes et al.

(2020) sample, applicants collectively completed 805 off-site and 832 on-site interviews, showing how quickly interview labor accumulates across a search portfolio. Each component may have a legitimate purpose, but the cumulative structure becomes difficult to defend when several encounters measure the same broad constructs of enthusiasm, communication, or collegiality. The appropriate standard is marginal informational value: every evaluative stage should produce evidence that the committee does not already possess.

Excessive interviewing can also distort what is being measured. A candidate who begins with breakfast, moves through back-to-back meetings, delivers a high-stakes presentation, and continues through dinner is being evaluated partly on sustained social performance under fatigue. Yet endurance across a twelve-hour itinerary is not synonymous with excellence in research, teaching, mentoring, clinical practice, or service. The more a search depends on informal impressions gathered late in an exhausting visit, the more the process risks measuring stamina and social ease rather than the competencies stated in the job description. Rigor therefore requires reducing construct contamination, not maximizing candidate exposure.

Repeated encounters also multiply opportunities for bias. Culpepper and O'Meara (2021) identify first impressions, attribution error, stereotypes, cultural similarity, and good-fit/bad-fit reasoning as recurring vulnerabilities in faculty hiring. Unscripted conversations can introduce different questions, inconsistent expectations, or personal information that is irrelevant to the role. Evidence summarized in the same research brief also indicates that women can experience more interruptions and questioning during academic job talks, illustrating how ostensibly common interview formats may not produce equivalent conditions. Adding more loosely structured encounters therefore increases the number of moments in which unequal treatment can accumulate.

A more defensible model would limit formal evaluation to a small number of purposeful stages. For many searches, dossier review, one structured remote semifinal interview, and one standardized campus visit should be sufficient unless the institution can specify what unique evidence an additional round will provide. Within the campus visit, some meetings should be explicitly informational rather than evaluative so that applicants can assess colleagues, resources, benefits, and local conditions without assuming that every conversational detail will enter the final vote. This approach does not weaken scrutiny; it concentrates scrutiny on evidence with a clear relationship to the faculty role.

Unstructured Evaluation and Search-Committee Bias

The third barrier is the mismatch between standardized applicant requirements and unstandardized committee judgment. Faculty advertisements may specify broad qualifications while leaving preferred characteristics, weights, and tradeoffs unstated (Fernandes et al., 2020). Culpepper and O'Meara (2021) further identify value-laden terms such as “star,” “promise,” and “fit” as concepts that can rationalize decisions without a common operational definition. An applicant may therefore submit a highly structured dossier while being judged through criteria that change across evaluators or across stages. The result is procedural asymmetry: candidates are expected to be precise about their qualifications while committees may remain imprecise about what counts.

Ambiguous criteria are particularly dangerous because they permit standards to move after committee members develop preferences. A department may initially emphasize research productivity, later elevate teaching when one finalist has a stronger research record, and finally invoke fit when another candidate performs well on both dimensions. Such shifts need not be consciously discriminatory to produce inequity; they simply make the decision difficult to test against a stable standard. Culpepper and O'Meara (2021) summarize evidence that women and racially minoritized scholars can encounter heightened scrutiny when evaluation criteria are vague. Pre-committing to criteria and weights before reviewing applicants is therefore a basic safeguard against post hoc justification.

Prestige is one of the most consequential shortcuts available to committees. Culpepper and O'Meara (2021), drawing on faculty-network research, report that a small share of doctoral

institutions produces a disproportionately large share of tenure-track faculty. Clauzet et al. (2015), Lee et al. (2021), and Wapman et al. (2022) similarly describe hierarchical faculty hiring networks in which institutional status strongly structures academic mobility. Prestige can contain information about training environments, but it is a weak substitute for direct evidence of the applicant's research, teaching, mentoring, and program-building capacity. When pedigree is treated as proof of quality, the hiring process reproduces prior access to elite institutions rather than independently evaluating present capability (Burrell & Richardson, 2023).

This problem is amplified because seemingly objective dossier components can already contain social bias. Culpepper and O'Meara (2021) summarize studies showing gender differences in recommendation-letter language and differential evaluations of otherwise comparable CVs, with particularly negative effects documented for Black and Latinx women in some studies. They also note that publication counts, citations, and grant histories may themselves reflect unequal access to recognition and resources. Treating these indicators as context-free measures of merit can therefore compound earlier disparities (Burrell & Richardson, 2023). Committees should use scholarly metrics as evidence, but they should avoid converting inherited advantage into an unquestioned proxy for future performance.

Committee composition and deliberation rules determine whether these biases are challenged or reinforced. Culpepper and O'Meara (2021) note that evaluators are often drawn to candidates who resemble existing faculty and that rank dynamics can make junior committee members reluctant to challenge senior professors. Burrell and Richardson (2023) likewise argue that search committees can reproduce homogeneity when they rely on familiar networks, elite pedigrees, and unexamined assumptions about quality. A committee can therefore be formally diverse yet remain procedurally dominated by a small number of high-status voices. Independent scoring before discussion, diversified membership, and explicit rules for deliberation reduce the chance that early preferences become collective conclusions without adequate challenge (Burrell & Richardson, 2023).

Structured tools are useful precisely because they discipline rather than eliminate professional judgment. Arevalo et al. (2025) demonstrate an approach in which hiring rubrics are aligned with the actual expectations of teaching faculty roles, while O'Meara et al. (2020) show how behavioral design can be used to reduce predictable bias in faculty selection. A well-constructed rubric forces a committee to identify the evidence that matters before knowing which candidates possess it. Common interview questions and behavioral anchors then give each applicant a comparable opportunity to demonstrate relevant competence. Structure does not make hiring mechanical; it makes the reasoning behind a consequential human judgment more visible and defensible.

Organizational Culture as the Hidden Hiring Criterion

Procedural reforms will fail if organizational culture rewards the very discretion those reforms are intended to constrain. Liera (2020) shows that a culture of niceness can discourage direct discussion of racial inequity in faculty hiring because disagreement is treated as a threat to collegial harmony. In such environments, committee members may avoid challenging a colleague's use of fit, pedigree, or quality even when those terms function unevenly. The practical consequence for applicants is substantial: formal criteria may exist on paper while the decisive work occurs through informal conversation. Equity therefore depends not only on having a rubric but on creating a culture in which evaluators can interrogate one another's reasoning without being cast as disruptive.

The language of fit illustrates how culture can become an unstated selection criterion. Departments have legitimate needs related to curriculum, research coverage, mentoring, or collaboration, but fit can expand from these concrete needs into a preference for intellectual familiarity, social ease, or similarity to current faculty. Culpepper and O'Meara (2021) identify good-fit/bad-fit reasoning as a recurrent bias, and Wu et al. (2023) likewise show that perceived

lack of fit can become an unfavorable characteristic in faculty selection. Because applicants cannot meaningfully prepare for a criterion that is undefined, broad fit judgments reduce transparency and increase the influence of cultural familiarity. Committees should therefore translate every invocation of fit into a specific, job-relevant requirement that can be applied across candidates.

Organizational culture also shapes how institutions interpret diversity commitments. Burrell (2024) describes “diversity dishonesty” as the gap between visible institutional commitments and substantive changes in policy, practice, or outcomes. Faculty hiring can reproduce that gap when universities require applicants to articulate commitments to inclusion while allowing search committees to rely on opaque fit judgments, prestige filters, or inconsistent interview conditions. The contradiction is especially salient because hiring is one of the points at which institutional values become materially consequential. A university demonstrates commitment to equity less through aspirational language than through the decision rules it is willing to make explicit, monitor, and defend (Burrell, 2024).

Burrell and Richardson (2023) offer a practical organizational response by emphasizing trained and diverse committees, broader recruitment, common interview questions, comparable campus experiences, and evaluation tools used across stages. Their recommendations are important because they treat fairness as a leadership and systems responsibility rather than as the private virtue of individual evaluators. The applicant-facing implication is clear: universities should not ask candidates to trust that committees will be fair; they should design procedures that make unfairness more difficult. Organizational culture becomes credible when it is translated into repeatable practices (Burrell, 2024).

Why the Process Can Be Called Broken

Calling the faculty hiring process “broken” should not mean that every rejection is unjust or that universities should hire quickly at the expense of careful evaluation. The stronger claim is that a selection system is broken when its costs and complexity are not matched by commensurate gains in decision quality. The evidence reviewed here identifies several such mismatches: large volumes of tailored applications with widespread nonresponse, months of waiting without transparent timelines, repeated interview encounters without distinct evidentiary purposes, and highly consequential judgments made through terms such as fit or promise that may not be operationally defined. These are not isolated inconveniences; together they create a system in which applicants bear substantial risk while institutions retain substantial discretion.

The process is also broken when procedural inconsistency and organizational culture interact. Bias does not need to appear as explicit exclusion to affect outcomes; it can operate through whose pedigree seems impressive, whose research feels familiar, whose personality feels collegial, whose gaps appear concerning, or whose accomplishments require additional proof. Culpepper and O’Meara (2021) and Burrell and Richardson (2023) show how these judgments can emerge throughout faculty searches, while Liera (2020) demonstrates how cultural norms may prevent committees from naming or challenging them. A process that depends heavily on good intentions but weakly on structured safeguards is therefore fragile by design.

Finally, the process is broken when its temporal design magnifies every other defect. In an annual market, a delayed or opaque search does not merely waste time; it can consume a meaningful portion of the candidate’s yearly opportunity set. The applicant who reaches several campus visits and receives late rejections may have little access to comparable positions until the next fall. That temporal asymmetry raises the standard universities should apply to their own procedures. If a search can redirect a candidate’s career for a year, then each stage should be necessary, transparent, and professionally administered.

Research Method and Research Design

This qualitative study examined the experiences of faculty applicants who navigated hiring processes in higher education. The study focused on applicants’ experiences with prolonged hiring timelines, repeated interviews, inadequate communication, financial and logistical burdens, search

committee interactions, subjective evaluation practices, and perceived inequities in faculty selection. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the purpose of the study was to understand how applicants experienced and interpreted hiring practices that are often evaluated from the institutional perspective rather than from the perspective of individuals seeking faculty employment.

The study centered on the distinction between rigorous faculty selection and unnecessarily burdensome hiring practices. Universities have legitimate reasons to carefully evaluate candidates for faculty appointments; however, participants described processes involving multiple interviews, extensive preparation, prolonged uncertainty, inconsistent communication, poorly coordinated campus visits, and subjective evaluation practices. Examining these experiences provided insight into how faculty hiring procedures affected applicants' perceptions of fairness, professionalism, respect, equity, and organizational culture.

Participants

The study included 10 participants with experience applying and interviewing for faculty positions in higher education. All participants had progressed beyond the initial application stage and had participated in formal faculty-selection activities. Their experiences included screening interviews, department-chair interviews, search committee interviews, meetings with academic administrators, finalist interviews, campus visits, research presentations, travel arrangements, reimbursement processes, and employment negotiations.

Several participants described repeated experiences as finalists across multiple institutions and hiring cycles. Consequently, the data reflected not only isolated encounters with individual universities but also recurring patterns participants observed while navigating the faculty labor market. Participants' extensive involvement in different faculty searches allowed them to compare communication practices, interview requirements, administrative processes, and interpersonal treatment across institutions.

Data Collection

Data were collected using three open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed descriptions of participants' faculty hiring experiences. The questions concentrated on three dimensions of the applicant experience: communication and closure, interview and logistical burden, and perceptions of fairness and organizational culture.

Participants were encouraged to describe specific hiring events and explain why those experiences were consequential. Their accounts included unanswered emails, delayed decisions, verbal offers that did not materialize, numerous interview rounds, unexpected scheduling demands, inaccessible or inappropriate accommodations, delayed reimbursement, questionable interviewer behavior, perceived academic-pedigree bias, and circumstances in which applicants believed they were not treated as serious prospective colleagues.

The analysis emphasized concrete experiences rather than asking participants only whether they believed a particular institution's hiring process was effective or fair. This approach allowed participants to describe what occurred and subsequently explain how the experience shaped their interpretations of the institution, the search process, and their prospects for obtaining faculty employment.

Data Collection Question One: Communication, Timing, and Closure

Participants were asked:

“Can you describe your experiences with communication and timing during faculty searches, including how long the process took, how universities kept you informed, and how you were notified when you were selected or no longer being considered?”

This question examined how communication practices influenced applicants' experiences throughout faculty searches. Participants described delayed decisions, unanswered correspondence, uncertainty after finalist interviews, canceled interviews, verbal assurances that did not materialize

into formal offers, and circumstances in which applicants had to initiate repeated contact simply to determine whether they remained under consideration.

Theme: Prolonged Uncertainty and Lack of Closure

Prolonged uncertainty and lack of closure refers to extended periods during which applicants received insufficient information about whether a search remained active, whether they remained under consideration, or whether a hiring decision had already been made. This theme was not limited to ordinary waiting between hiring stages. Rather, it reflected circumstances in which institutional silence persisted after applicants had invested substantial time and effort in multiple interviews, finalist visits, presentations, and preparation. The emotional significance of this uncertainty appeared to increase as participants advanced further into a search. Becoming a finalist encouraged applicants to consider the possibility of relocating, leaving current employment, adjusting family responsibilities, or beginning a new professional chapter. When institutions subsequently stopped communicating, applicants were left attempting to interpret silence while continuing to make consequential career decisions.

One participant stated: “With 3 large research level 1 universities, I was a finalist. I went through 4 interviews and a campus visit, only to never receive any update as to if I got the job until, I sent several e-mails 3 months after the final interview. I spend hours prepping and preparing for all these interviews, only not even be shown the respect of an update on my applicant status. It is such a roller coaster to get excited about a job and to imagine yourself working there but then to later not hear anything or to have to track them down about what happened.”

Another participant stated: “I was given a verbal job offer and was told that I would be getting a written offer without 2 weeks. By week 4, I had not offer. I sent a follow up e-mail to the search chair, who responded to me 2 weeks later stating that they would not be moving forward with the position.”

A third participant stated: “After completing 4 interviews, I was scheduled for a final interview meeting with the dean to discuss an offer. When I logged on to Zoom for the meeting, the dean did not show up. The assistant dean came to the meeting stating that the intent was to hire me but university had some administrative processes to go through. The offer never came. I sent e-mail messages that were never responded to at all. The next semester same position was posted that department for the same program where I was a finalist. I applied again and was rejected without an interview.”

These accounts demonstrate that uncertainty was intensified when institutions had previously communicated strong interest. Applicants were not simply awaiting an unknown outcome; some had been led to believe that an offer was forthcoming. The subsequent absence of communication complicated their ability to interpret whether the delay represented an administrative problem, an unresolved search, or a rejection.

A participant stated: “The silence was probably worse than the rejection would have been. Every morning I was checking my email before I even got out of bed. Every time my phone went off, part of me thought maybe this was finally the university calling. After a few weeks, you start questioning everything you said during the interview. Then you start wondering whether you imagined how well it went. At some point I just wanted them to tell me no so I could stop carrying the possibility around with me every day.”

A participant stated: “What made it hard was that my life could not just stop while they decided. I still had other applications, other interviews, and decisions I needed to make. But when you have been told you are a finalist or that an offer may be coming, you are afraid to close another door. Their delay becomes your uncertainty. They may see it as a search that is taking a little longer than expected, but for the applicant it can affect your whole career.”

Theme: Communication as Respect and Procedural Fairness

Communication as respect and procedural fairness refers to participants' perceptions that timely, transparent communication represented an acknowledgment of their professional value.

Participants generally recognized that competitive faculty searches necessarily result in unsuccessful applicants. The problem was not simply rejection. Rather, participants distinguished between being rejected through a professional process and being ignored after an institution had requested substantial investments of their time. Under this theme, communication became relational. A rejection message communicated one outcome, whereas repeated silence after interviews communicated something broader about whether the institution considered the applicant's time worthy of acknowledgment.

One participant stated: "I was contacted by a recruiter to see if I was interested in interviewing. I stated that I was. I was given some dates for interviews and asked which dates would be best for me. In a follow up e-mail I provided the dates to the recruiter and blocked them off on my schedule. The recruiter never acknowledged my e-mail. I sent several follow up e-mail messages and was ignored by the recruiter. I ended up contacting the director of human resources who told me that the decision was made to interview other candidates."

Another participant stated: "Applied for a job 10 months before they contacted me. The human resources director asked me if I was still interested, which I was. They scheduled me for an interview. I started to prepare for the university by doing research on the university, the members on the search committee and the department. The day before the interview the human resources director told me that the search committee had reconvened and decided to interview some other candidates instead of me."

These experiences illustrate a perceived lack of reciprocity. Applicants were expected to respond quickly, remain available, research the institution, reserve interview dates, and prepare professionally. Participants became frustrated when universities did not demonstrate comparable responsiveness.

A participant stated: "I can handle being told I was not selected. I have been rejected before and I know only one person can get the job. What bothered me was feeling like once they decided they did not need me anymore, I stopped existing. They had no problem emailing me when they needed something from me. They wanted my availability right away, my documents right away, my references right away. But when I needed one email telling me where I stood, suddenly nobody could respond."

A participant stated: "At some point it stopped feeling like a hiring process and started feeling like I was asking people to acknowledge that I existed. You should not have to send four or five emails just to find out that you did not get a job. A rejection hurts for a little while. Being ignored makes you feel disposable."

Data Collection Question Two: Interview Burden, Logistics, and Institutional Responsibility

Participants were asked:

"Can you describe what universities required from you during faculty interviews and campus visits, including the number of interviews, preparation, travel, accommodations, expenses, scheduling, and any other expectations placed on you as a candidate?"

This question examined the cumulative burden associated with faculty selection. Participants described repeated interviews, extensive preparation, one- and two-day campus visits, travel expenses, scheduling conflicts, reimbursement delays, unsuitable accommodations, and circumstances in which institutional expectations required applicants to absorb substantial financial or personal costs.

Theme: Excessive Candidate Burden and Administrative Dysfunction

Excessive candidate burden and administrative dysfunction refers to hiring procedures that required substantial candidate effort without an apparent proportional increase in decision-relevant information. The theme included repetitive interview rounds, multiple meetings covering similar topics, extensive finalist preparation, poorly coordinated schedules, absent interviewers, and institutional demands imposed with little advance notice.

Participants' accounts suggest an important distinction between rigor and procedural volume. A demanding search is not necessarily a rigorous search. Rigor derives from systematically collecting relevant evidence about an applicant's ability to perform the faculty role. Requiring candidates to participate in numerous encounters that collect substantially similar information may increase exhaustion without improving selection quality.

One participant stated:

"Over the last 2 years, I have been a finalist 10 times without an acceptable offer. 10 times I have done at least 4 interviews in the process. 10 times I have prepared for one-to-2-day interviews, only to not get a job."

Another participant stated: "I had completed a screening interview and an interview with the department chair. My next interview was with the 6-member search committee. Only the search chair showed up. The other 5 members had their AI notetakers login on their behalf. They did not value me enough as potential colleague to come log on the Zoom to meet me."

A third participant stated: "I completed a screening interview with the human resources recruiter. I completed an interview the search committee. One hour after the search committee interview, I was contacted by human resources for my on-campus interview but only given one day, in 4 days, with a statement the search committee needed to hire right away. That day happened to conflict with a medical appointment that was planned in advance. I explained to the human resources director that I could not make that date and provided some other dates. I was told if I was really interested in this job, I do what I could to make that date work. I stated that I could not. The human resources director stated the search committee would be moving on to other candidates."

These experiences demonstrate how institutional convenience can become candidate burden. In the final account, flexibility was effectively transformed into a test of applicant commitment, with willingness to alter a previously scheduled medical obligation becoming an unofficial measure of interest in the position.

A participant stated: "By the fourth interview I was thinking, what else can I possibly tell you that I have not already told somebody at this university? The HR person asked about my experience. The chair asked about my experience. The search committee asked about my experience. Then several faculty members asked me almost the same questions again. Every time I had to prepare like it was the interview that would decide everything. It felt like they kept adding steps because nobody wanted to take responsibility for making a decision."

Another participant stated: "The hardest part is that universities see their search as one process, but as an applicant I may be doing four or five of these searches at the same time. One university wants a research talk. Another wants a teaching demonstration. Another wants six individual Zoom meetings. You are doing your regular job while preparing all of this. After a while, you are completely exhausted, but every university expects you to show up looking rested, excited, and grateful to be there."

Theme: Financial, Physical, and Accessibility Vulnerability

Financial, physical, and accessibility vulnerability refers to circumstances in which faculty hiring procedures placed applicants at risk because participation depended on personal financial resources, physical accessibility, health conditions, or the ability to absorb unexpected expenses. The theme demonstrates that equal procedures do not necessarily result in equitable experiences. Requiring every applicant to purchase travel and seek reimbursement afterward, for example, may appear identical in procedural terms. However, the requirement disproportionately burdens applicants who do not have sufficient available funds or credit. Similarly, accommodations that do not account for disability or health conditions can affect a candidate's ability to participate effectively.

One participant stated: "The university asked for me to pay for my travel expenses up front. What if I did not have the money to pay my travel expenses? I filled out the forms in advance of

my visit to be reimbursed. I had to send 7 follow up interviews to the dean and it took me over 4 months to be reimbursed.”

Another participant stated: “I was booked in a dusty old hotel that was not handicap accessible. What if I was in a wheelchair? I found out the original hotel was built in the early 1900s. When I entered the hotel, they had a resident cat, which proceeded to wrap its legs around my suit pants when I want to check it. I am severely allergic to cats. I spent the night before my interview sneezing and sniffing.”

A participant stated: “I was given a job offer of \$120,000 a year were \$70,000 was base pay and the rest was based on performance incentives based maintaining quality teaching and service. I asked for specific metrics for the preference incentives and they could not provide them to me. I was also only given a 1-year contract. Even though the courses were offered synchronous on Zoom, I was told that I had to move within 50 miles to campus. The moving expenses were to be reimbursed, which put me in an awkward position of embarrassment to have to tell them that I did not have the money to move.”

A participant stated: “Having to tell them I could not afford several thousand dollars up front was embarrassing. I am interviewing for a professor position, so there is this assumption that I should somehow already have money. I remember thinking that maybe they would see me differently because I had to ask about when I would get reimbursed. You are already trying to convince them you belong there, and now you are having to explain your financial situation to people who are deciding whether to hire you.”

A participant stated: “The university probably thought paying for the hotel later was a minor administrative issue. For me, it meant watching my credit card balance for months. That is what bothers me about these processes. Something that is a paperwork delay to the university can be somebody's rent, groceries, or credit card payment.”

Data Collection Question Three: Search Committee Behavior, Equity, and Organizational Culture

Participants were asked:

“How did your interactions with search committees, faculty members, administrators, and recruiters influence your perception of whether the hiring process was fair, equitable, respectful, and whether you could see yourself belonging at that institution?”

This question examined how applicants interpreted their interpersonal encounters with institutional representatives. Participants discussed academic pedigree, research quality, cultural sensitivity, professionalism, treatment by senior administrators, and whether their experiences communicated that they would be respected as future faculty colleagues.

Theme: Bias, Subjectivity, and Unequal Evaluation

Bias, subjectivity, and unequal evaluation refers to circumstances in which applicants perceived that judgments about their suitability were influenced by assumptions, personal familiarity, prestige, cultural expectations, or loosely defined notions of quality rather than transparent and consistently applied job-related criteria.

This theme does not require that participants were able to prove the intent of individual committee members. Rather, it reflects how applicants experienced evaluative encounters in which the basis of judgment appeared unclear, dismissive, or inconsistently connected to the actual requirements of the faculty position.

One participant stated: “During an interview, the quality of my research was questioned and belittled by a search committee member. It was disparaging because she stated that she had never heard of some of the journals that I had published in. She also asked me the university that I got my doctorate from was from one of those on-line universities. It was so offensive and so unwelcoming.”

Another participant stated: “For my interview, the university put me in a Civil War Hotel that was part of a former plantation. Not only did it come off as racist but so insensitive to me as an African-American applicant.”

The first account demonstrates how an evaluator's familiarity with particular journals or institutions may become an informal proxy for academic quality. The second demonstrates that participants' perceptions of equity extended beyond formal scoring decisions to the broader context created by institutional choices.

A participant stated: “It felt like I walked into the interview already having to prove that my doctorate counted as much as somebody else's doctorate. They were not asking me what I learned or what I had accomplished. It felt like they were asking whether the name on my diploma was prestigious enough for them. After spending years earning that degree and building a research record, it was humiliating to feel like somebody could dismiss all of it because my background did not look familiar to them.”

A participant stated: “The word that makes me nervous now is ‘fit.’ Nobody can really tell you what it means. Sometimes it feels like fit means somebody they already feel comfortable with, somebody who went to the same kinds of schools, publishes in the journals they already know, talks the way they talk, and has a career path they recognize. If I do not fit that picture, I do not know whether my actual qualifications ever get a fair chance.”

A participant expressed: “During my third interview, the associate dean told me that I was overqualified for the position. That statement stayed with me because I could not understand why my experience suddenly became a problem. If I met the qualifications, applied intentionally, went through three interviews, and repeatedly demonstrated that I genuinely wanted the position, why tell me at that point that I was somehow too qualified? It felt like the goalposts had moved. I had spent my career believing that gaining experience, developing expertise, serving in different capacities, and continuing to grow professionally would make me more competitive. Instead, in that moment, those accomplishments seemed to become another reason to question whether I belonged. On paper, my qualifications may look like they should open doors to leadership, advancement, and meaningful opportunities. In reality, I have learned that some doors are not simply closed. They are surrounded by networks, traditions, and unspoken expectations that can make them extraordinarily difficult to enter if your journey does not resemble the journeys of the people already inside. Those barriers are not always obvious enough to point to and say, ‘There it is.’ Sometimes they are hidden behind words like fit, overqualified, not the right background, or not what we had in mind. It can feel like standing outside a room where you can clearly see that you have something to contribute, but the people holding the key keep finding another reason not to unlock the door and let you in the chamber.

Those experiences have been frustrating and, at times, deeply discouraging. You start wondering how many more credentials you are supposed to earn, how much more experience you are supposed to accumulate, or how many times you are supposed to prove yourself before somebody simply evaluates what you can actually contribute. At the same time, those experiences have made me more determined. They push me to keep knocking on doors and to search for organizations that can see value in a career that did not follow a perfectly straight line.

My path has zig-zagged because life has required me to adapt, serve, learn, and grow in different environments. I do not want that journey to merely be tolerated. I want it to be understood as part of what makes me valuable. A genuinely innovative organization cannot claim to value different perspectives while repeatedly selecting people who attended the same kinds of universities, traveled the same professional routes, developed within the same networks, and look almost interchangeable on paper. If every successful candidate has essentially the same story, then the organization may be reproducing familiarity rather than selecting the broadest range of talent. I want a search committee to look at my journey and ask not why it is different, but what that difference allows me to bring to the institution that might otherwise be missing.”

A participant stated: “I have experienced search processes where it seemed that scholars from certain universities or certain professional backgrounds were automatically treated as a better fit, more credible, or somehow more valuable to the institution before the committee had really taken the time to understand the other applicants. There is something painful about realizing that you may be sitting in an interview trying to explain years of work, service, scholarship, sacrifice, and accomplishment while somebody else receives an invisible advantage simply because the name of the university on their diploma is more recognizable.

What concerns me is that these judgments often ignore how unequal access to prestigious institutions can be. People do not all begin their lives standing at the same starting line with the same information, resources, mentors, networks, financial support, or freedom to make the same choices. A committee might be immediately impressed by somebody who graduated from Princeton, Yale, Duke, or another prestigious university. But while that person was attending one of those institutions, I might have been on active military duty risking my life in service to this country. My path was different, but different should not automatically mean less valuable, less talented, less intelligent, or even less deserving. That is why I wish search committees would remember that they are not hiring a diploma. They are hiring a human being. A university name cannot tell you the complete story of someone's discipline, resilience, intellectual curiosity, sacrifices, leadership, character, or ability to serve students. You have to be willing to look beyond the label and understand the journey that produced the person sitting in front of you.

Prestige can sometimes tell you something about access, networks, history, and institutional reputation, but it does not automatically tell you who worked the hardest, who overcame the most, who created opportunities where none existed, or who will make the greatest contribution once given a chance. Sometimes prestige reflects inherited access more clearly than unrealized potential. I believe a more equitable search committee should ask very different questions: What did this applicant build with the resources that were actually available to them? What obstacles did they overcome? Who did they bring with them as they advanced? What communities did they serve? What problems did they solve when nobody handed them an established pathway?

To me, the real weight of a candidate is not found in the shine of the university name printed across the top of a résumé. It is found in the substance underneath it, including the work, the service, the scholarship, the resilience, the people they have helped, and the impact they have created. Sometimes the most impressive part of a person's story is not where they started or whose door opened for them. It is how far they traveled when very few doors opened at all.”

Theme: Hiring as a Window into Organizational Culture

Hiring as a window into organizational culture refers to the way applicants interpreted recruitment and selection experiences as evidence of how the institution might operate after employment. Participants evaluated universities at the same time universities evaluated them. The behavior of search chairs, administrators, faculty members, recruiters, and other representatives therefore communicated information about institutional norms. Professionalism, responsiveness, hospitality, accessibility, and respect for candidates' time served as early indicators of how authority and interpersonal relationships might function within the institution.

One participant stated: “I was interviewing as a finalist for a large state research level one university on campus. However, one of my interviews took place via Zoom with the director of research. The whole time he was interviewing, he was hitting or smoking his vape. It felt so disrespectful.”

A participant shared: “I went through the entire interview process believing that I was competing for a tenure-track faculty position. For almost two months, I prepared for and completed four interviews, and eventually I was invited to campus as a finalist. I took every stage seriously because I believed the institution was seriously evaluating me for the tenure-track role that had been advertised. By the time I reached the final interview of my campus visit, I was exhausted but also hopeful. I thought I had finally reached the end of a long process and that we were going to talk about whether I would receive the position I had actually interviewed for. Instead, during my

final meeting, the dean presented me with a one-year visiting professor position. I remember sitting there trying to process what was happening. For two months, nobody had told me that the position had changed. Nobody had told me that I was being considered for something temporary. I had gone through four interviews and an entire finalist visit believing that this was a tenure-track search. Then suddenly, at the very end, I was being offered something completely different.

What made it worse was the way it was presented. It felt as though I was supposed to be grateful, almost like they were handing me a prize and expecting me to recognize how fortunate I was to receive it. Internally, though, it felt like the opposite. It felt like I had trained for a marathon, reached the finish line, and then been told that the race I had been running was never actually the race they intended to let me finish. I felt disappointed, insulted, and honestly a little humiliated. If the university believed I was only appropriate for a one-year visiting position, I wish they had told me that before asking me to invest two months of preparation, four interviews, and a finalist campus visit. I could have made an informed decision about whether that opportunity made sense for me. Instead, I felt like the terms of the opportunity changed only after I had already invested everything the institution asked of me. The experience also made me question what all of those interviews had actually been measuring. Was I ever truly being considered for the tenure-track position? Did something change during the search? Did they decide I was good enough to teach there temporarily but not good enough to invest in permanently? Those are painful questions to leave an interview carrying with you. A hiring process should not leave a finalist wondering whether the opportunity they spent months pursuing ever really existed for them in the form that was advertised."

Another participant stated: "I had completed a screening interview and an interview with the department chair. My next interview was with the 6-member search committee. Only the search chair showed up. The other 5 members had their AI notetakers login on their behalf. They did not value me enough as potential colleague to come log on the Zoom interview to meet me."

A participant stated: "After completing 4 interviews, I was scheduled for a final interview meeting with the dean to discuss an offer. When I logged on to Zoom for the meeting, the dean did not show up. The assistant dean came to the meeting stating that the intent was to hire me but university had some administrative processes to go through. The offer never came. I sent e-mail messages that were never responded to at all. The next semester same position was posted that department for the same program where I was a finalist. I applied again and was rejected without an interview."

A participant stated: "I remember thinking that this was probably the best the university was ever going to treat me because they were still trying to recruit me. If people could not show up on time, answer emails, or treat me professionally when I was a finalist, what was it going to be like after I worked there and they did not have to impress me anymore? The interview stopped being just about whether they wanted me. I started asking whether I wanted to belong to a place that operated like this."

A participant stated: "You learn a lot about a university when something goes wrong. Anybody can put words like respect, inclusion, and excellence on a website. I paid more attention to what happened when my reimbursement was late, when somebody missed a meeting, or when I asked a difficult question. That showed me more about the culture than anything they said during the campus tour."

A participant stated, "I applied for the job in September 2025. I was not contacted for an interview until the second week of January 2026, and my first interview with the department chair was scheduled for the second week of February. Then I interviewed with the search committee during the third week of March. In the second week of April, I was told that I was a finalist, but my finalist campus interview was not scheduled until the fourth week of July. I have never experienced anything like that before. I had never had an interview scheduled almost three months in advance. By that point, it felt like I had been running a marathon where someone kept moving the finish line farther away every time I thought I was getting close. In May, they asked me to complete tax

forms, background-check forms, and provide my official transcripts. When they started requesting all of those documents, I thought that had to mean I was getting very close to an offer. It raised my expectations even more. I started allowing myself to think seriously about what it would be like to work there, whether I would have to move, what my life might look like, and whether all of these months of waiting were finally going to pay off. Now it has been three weeks since my campus visit, and I still have not heard anything. I even sent a thank-you email after the interview, and nobody responded to that either. That silence is probably the most frustrating part. After almost an entire year of waiting, preparing, interviewing, completing forms, and trying to remain excited about the opportunity, I still do not know where I stand. It feels like being left in a waiting room with no clock and nobody willing to tell you whether your name is ever going to be called. You start going back through every interview in your head, wondering whether you said something wrong or whether they were ever seriously considering you in the first place. I understand that universities have processes and approvals, but applicants have lives too. Ten months of uncertainty takes something out of you.

At some point, the excitement starts turning into frustration, doubt, and even hopelessness because you have invested so much of yourself in the process and cannot even get a basic update telling you what is happening. If you are treated with dismissal or no sense of urgency as an applicant. What happens when you are an employee?"

Integrated Interpretation of the Six Themes

Across the three interview questions, the six themes were closely interconnected. Prolonged uncertainty became more damaging when applicants had already completed extensive interviews. Excessive candidate burden became more troubling when committee members did not demonstrate comparable preparation. Financial vulnerability became an equity issue when participation implicitly assumed that applicants possessed sufficient resources to subsidize institutional recruitment. Subjective evaluations of academic pedigree contributed to broader questions about organizational belonging. Communication failures became evidence through which participants interpreted how universities valued individuals with relatively little power in the hiring relationship.

A participant stated: "Each week I apply for 5 to 10 jobs on average and applied for 300 jobs in one year. I have been on the job market for 3 years without a viable job offer."

The significance of this statement becomes greater when considered alongside another participant's account of becoming a finalist 10 times and completing at least four interviews during each process. An individual university may perceive one additional interview, one delayed email, one reimbursement problem, or one schedule change as relatively minor. Applicants experience those demands cumulatively across searches.

This distinction is central to the study's findings. The faculty applicant does not experience each institution's hiring process in isolation from the broader labor market. Applicants may simultaneously prepare applications, participate in interviews, complete their existing professional responsibilities, pursue other searches, manage personal obligations, and absorb repeated rejection or uncertainty. Institutional practices that appear modest from within a single search can therefore become substantial when reproduced across an applicant's job search.

The six themes consequently point toward a broader conceptual problem: faculty applicants occupy an asymmetrical position within the hiring process. Universities possess considerable discretion over schedules, interview structures, communication, evaluation criteria, travel arrangements, and final decisions, whereas applicants have relatively limited control once they enter the process. That asymmetry makes procedural fairness particularly important.

The findings suggest that the quality of faculty hiring should therefore not be measured by how many stages an institution requires or how difficult the process is to complete. A rigorous process is one that gathers sufficient job-relevant evidence to make a defensible decision while minimizing unnecessary candidate burden. Timely communication, structured evaluation, fewer redundant interviews, accessible accommodations, reasonable reimbursement practices, transparent

selection criteria, and respectful closure would not make faculty hiring less selective. They would make the process more professionally defensible and more equitable for the individuals attempting to enter the professoriate.

Discussion

The first reform is to define the job before evaluating the people. Departments should identify the small number of competencies that the successful faculty member must demonstrate, translate those competencies into observable evidence, and decide their relative weight before reviewing dossiers. Arevalo et al. (2025) illustrate the value of role-aligned rubrics, and O'Meara et al. (2020) provide a broader behavioral-design rationale for pre-committing to decision rules. This approach prevents the committee from redefining excellence after becoming attached to particular candidates. It also allows applicants to understand what evidence deserves emphasis.

The second reform is to reduce applicant labor at early stages. Initial submissions should be limited to materials necessary for preliminary screening, with confidential letters, extended teaching portfolios, or other labor-intensive documents requested only from candidates who advance. The application process should not require the creation of a system log-in and a 30-to-45-minute application process. An applicant should be able to apply with providing contact information and an academic resume. Progressive evidence collection respects applicant time and reduces committee reading volume without sacrificing information needed later in the search. It also makes the process more accessible to candidates who lack extensive administrative support or whose recommenders are being asked to submit letters to dozens of institutions. Efficiency at the application stage can therefore improve both equity and decision quality.

The third reform is to cap evaluative stages and require each stage to justify itself. A reasonable default for many faculty searches is one dossier screen, one structured semifinal interview, and one standardized campus visit. Additional rounds should be exceptional and tied to a specific unresolved competency rather than added because more interviewing feels safer. Robinson (2025) criticizes excessive and inconsistent interview processes in hiring more broadly, and the faculty-specific evidence shows why the concern is acute in academia: the process already includes numerous presentations and meetings within a single visit. A search becomes more rigorous when it removes redundant evidence and focuses attention on the evidence that matters.

The fourth reform is to standardize the conditions under which finalists are evaluated. Burrell and Richardson (2023) recommend comparable candidate experiences and common, job-relevant questions, principles that should extend to schedule length, job-talk format, teaching audience, access to decision makers, and advance information. Every finalist should receive the same core questions and comparable opportunities to demonstrate required competencies. Evaluators should record evidence independently before collective discussion so that early comments from high-status faculty do not anchor the group. Standardization preserves professional judgment while improving comparability.

The fifth reform is to treat communication as part of selection quality. Search advertisements should provide a realistic review window and anticipated interview period, and applicants should be notified when the timeline changes. Candidates who are no longer under consideration should receive prompt closure, especially after interviews. The 57% application nonresponse documented by Fernandes et al. (2020) demonstrates that this basic professional standard is not trivial. Clear communication allows applicants to manage competing offers and personal obligations while also signaling that the institution recognizes the asymmetry of power inherent in faculty selection.

The sixth reform is to audit the search after the appointment. A successful hire does not prove that the process was efficient or equitable. Institutions should examine time to decision, number of evaluative stages, candidate withdrawals, demographic patterns across stages, consistency of scoring, reasons for rejecting finalists, and adherence to the published criteria. Burrell's (2024) critique of symbolic diversity activity is relevant here: process improvement

requires measurable outcomes rather than declarations of intent. Post-search review turns faculty hiring from an inherited ritual into an organizational practice that can learn from evidence.

Practical Illustration: Two Ways to Run the Same Search

Consider a hypothetical assistant-professor search with 240 applicants. In a poorly designed version, the advertisement asks for an “outstanding scholar” and “excellent fit” without stating the relative importance of research, teaching, or programmatic contribution. Every applicant submits five narrative documents and three letters. Committee members screen files without a common rubric, use institutional pedigree as an informal shorthand, and conduct semifinal interviews with different questions. Finalists then complete a dense campus schedule containing a job talk, teaching demonstration, chair and dean interviews, meals, student meetings, and numerous individual faculty conversations. The committee ultimately debates who seemed strongest, most collegial, or most promising, and unsuccessful finalists wait weeks for a generic rejection. The process looks rigorous because it is laborious, but the applicant cannot determine which evidence actually drove the decision. A structured version of the same search begins by identifying four criteria; for example, research independence, capacity to teach specified courses, mentoring readiness, and contribution to a defined programmatic need; and publishes them in the advertisement. Applicants initially submit only a CV and focused statements relevant to those criteria. Committee members score files independently with behavioral anchors; letters are requested only from semifinalists.

Semifinalists complete one common structured interview, and finalists receive the campus schedule in advance, face equivalent evaluative conditions, and participate in clearly labeled informational meetings that do not generate scores. Final deliberation requires evidence tied to the preannounced criteria, and the department communicates a decision by a stated date. This search is not less selective. It is more defensible because the applicant burden is lower while the evidence is more comparable, interpretable, and accountable.

Additional Recommendations for Improving Faculty Hiring

Universities should strengthen faculty hiring by treating applicant communication, procedural transparency, and candidate time as dimensions of procedural fairness rather than administrative conveniences. Faculty applicants may invest months in a search while preparing specialized materials, participating in interviews, developing presentations, traveling to campus, and meeting numerous institutional stakeholders. When these demands are combined with prolonged silence, repetitive interviews, uncertain timelines, and delayed rejection notices, the hiring process becomes unnecessarily burdensome. The following recommendations provide additional mechanisms for creating a more efficient, equitable, transparent, and applicant-centered faculty hiring process.

Establish Formal Applicant Communication Standards

Universities should establish institution-wide communication expectations for every faculty search. Applicants should receive confirmation when application materials are received, periodic updates while the search remains active, and prompt notification when they are no longer being considered. Even when a committee has not reached a final decision, a brief status update can prevent applicants from remaining unnecessarily uncertain for weeks or months. Communication should therefore be treated as an expected component of search administration rather than an optional professional courtesy.

Notify Unsuccessful Applicants Promptly

Once a search committee has determined that an applicant will not advance, the institution should communicate that decision within a reasonable period rather than waiting until the successful candidate has formally accepted the position. There is little justification for allowing applicants to believe that they remain under consideration when a committee has already eliminated them. This

problem is particularly consequential in higher education because faculty opportunities are often concentrated within an annual hiring cycle. Delayed notification can interfere with applicants' ability to redirect their attention toward other opportunities while those searches remain viable.

Differentiate Communication by Stage of Candidacy

Communication should become increasingly personalized as candidates advance through the hiring process. Applicants eliminated during the initial screening stage may appropriately receive standardized professional notifications. Candidates who complete preliminary interviews should receive more individualized communication concerning their status. Finalists who participate in campus interviews, presentations, teaching demonstrations, and extensive meetings should ordinarily receive direct communication from the search chair or another designated institutional representative. The level of communication should correspond to the amount of time, effort, and professional labor the institution has requested from the candidate.

Eliminate Candidate Ghosting

Every faculty application should eventually receive an explicit disposition. Appropriate statuses might include under review, advanced, no longer under consideration, search suspended, search canceled, or position filled. Silence should not function as an unofficial rejection mechanism. When funding disappears, authorization changes, or a search is temporarily suspended, institutions should communicate those developments rather than requiring applicants to infer the outcome from prolonged inactivity.

Designate a Candidate Communication Coordinator

Every faculty search should identify one individual responsible for communication throughout the recruitment process. That person could be the search chair, department administrator, human resources representative, or another designated search professional. Applicants should know whom to contact regarding application status, timelines, interview schedules, travel arrangements, reimbursement, and related questions. Assigning this responsibility also creates accountability because communication failures can be traced to an identifiable role rather than becoming everyone's responsibility and therefore no one's responsibility.

Publish the Complete Interview Process in Advance

Applicants should be informed about the anticipated number, sequence, and purpose of interviews before entering the process. A university might specify that the process consists of application review, one structured virtual interview, one finalist campus visit, and a final decision. Unexpectedly introducing additional interviews after candidates believe they have completed the evaluation process creates unnecessary uncertainty and candidate burden. Transparency regarding the interview architecture allows applicants to understand the institutional expectations associated with continuing in the search.

Require Justification for Additional Interviews

Search committees should be required to explain what new job-related information another interview will produce before adding it to the process. The appropriate question is not simply whether another group would like to meet the candidate, but whether another evaluative encounter will generate information unavailable from existing evidence. When an additional meeting does not serve a distinct evaluative purpose, it should be informational rather than another formal interview. This establishes an important principle: additional process should generate additional decision-relevant evidence.

Consolidate Repetitive Interviews Through Structured Panels

Universities should reduce repetitive individual interviews by combining appropriate stakeholders into structured panel discussions. Candidates frequently encounter multiple faculty members who ask substantially similar questions concerning research, teaching, service, leadership, or

institutional fit. Such repetition increases candidate fatigue without necessarily improving the quality of the hiring decision. Structured panels can obtain comparable evidence from candidates while reducing interview duration and the number of separate evaluative encounters.

Distinguish Evaluative Meetings from Informational Meetings

Candidates should know which components of a campus visit contribute directly to the selection decision. Research presentations, teaching demonstrations, and formal committee interviews may appropriately constitute evaluative activities. Meetings intended to introduce candidates to colleagues, students, community resources, or institutional services should ordinarily be identified as informational. When every lunch, dinner, hallway conversation, and informal meeting becomes an undisclosed evaluation, the entire campus visit effectively becomes one continuous and poorly structured interview.

Limit Formal Evaluation Authority

Universities should distinguish between individuals who interact with candidates and those authorized to formally evaluate them. Faculty members who score candidates or participate substantially in selection decisions should understand the position requirements, receive appropriate search training, and evaluate evidence according to established criteria. An unstructured impression formed during a brief interaction should not carry equivalent weight to systematically collected evidence concerning teaching effectiveness, research accomplishments, professional experience, service, or leadership capability.

Eliminate Unexplained Hold Statuses

Universities sometimes need to keep alternative candidates under consideration while negotiating with a preferred candidate. Although that may be operationally necessary, applicants should not be left without information. Candidates can be informed that the search remains active, that the institution has not reached a final decision, and that another update will be provided by an approximate date. Transparency does not require disclosure of confidential negotiations; it requires basic acknowledgment that the applicant's candidacy remains unresolved.

Require Job-Related Documentation of Hiring Decisions

Search committees should document why semifinalists and finalists were advanced or eliminated using predetermined, job-related criteria. Terms such as fit, quality, promise, readiness, or collegiality should not substitute for specific evidence unless those concepts have been operationally defined before candidate evaluation begins. Written justification creates greater accountability and makes it more difficult for evaluation standards to change after individual committee members develop preferences for particular applicants.

Provide Meaningful Finalist Feedback When Appropriate

Finalists ordinarily make substantial investments in a faculty search and should receive professional closure. When institutional policies permit, universities should provide concise feedback connected to predetermined selection criteria. For example, an institution could explain that another candidate demonstrated substantially greater experience in a curricular area identified as essential to the position. Feedback need not reveal confidential committee deliberations, but it should provide more meaningful closure than a generic rejection after extensive candidate participation.

Establish a Candidate-Burden Budget

Search committees should estimate the total amount of uncompensated time required from candidates before finalizing their search procedures. Application materials, preliminary interviews, presentations, teaching demonstrations, campus travel, meals, faculty meetings, student meetings, administrator interviews, and supplementary assignments can collectively

impose substantial burdens. Every additional requirement should therefore be evaluated according to whether the information it produces justifies the time being requested from candidates.

Minimize Applicants' Financial Burden

Universities should directly arrange airfare, lodging, and other major travel expenses whenever practical or establish rapid reimbursement procedures. Applicants should not effectively finance a university's recruitment process through personal funds or credit for extended periods. Financially burdensome interview procedures may disproportionately disadvantage applicants with fewer economic resources and consequently create an additional barrier unrelated to academic qualifications.

Establish Maximum Intervals Between Hiring Stages

Institutions should develop internal benchmarks governing the amount of time permitted between application review, preliminary interviews, finalist selection, campus visits, and final decisions. Search committees exceeding those benchmarks should provide candidates with an updated timeline and explain the delay internally. Faculty scheduling difficulties and committee availability are legitimate operational challenges, but applicants should not routinely absorb the consequences through prolonged periods of uncertainty.

Measure Candidate Communication Performance

Communication quality should become an auditable component of faculty search effectiveness. Universities could monitor the percentage of applicants receiving acknowledgments, average time between hiring stages, average time between elimination and notification, percentage of applicants receiving final disposition notices, and number of candidate inquiries generated by unclear communication. What an institution formally measures is more likely to receive sustained administrative attention.

Survey Unsuccessful Candidates

Universities should systematically collect feedback from semifinalists and finalists after searches conclude. Anonymous surveys could assess communication quality, timeline transparency, interview redundancy, professionalism, scheduling, clarity of expectations, perceived consistency, and overall fairness. Unsuccessful candidates may provide particularly valuable information because they experience the selection process without receiving the positive outcome that might otherwise influence perceptions of the institution.

Establish a Search Stop Rule

Universities should establish conditions under which an existing search must be paused or terminated rather than repeatedly modified. If the department fundamentally changes the position, alters the desired disciplinary specialization, loses funding authorization, or discovers that the original selection criteria no longer reflect its needs, restarting the search may be more equitable than changing expectations for candidates already being evaluated. Applicants should not be required to compete against a substantially different set of criteria from those contained in the original advertisement.

Treat Candidate Experience as Evidence of Organizational Culture

Universities should recognize that the faculty hiring process gives applicants an unusually revealing view of institutional culture. Communication practices, scheduling, reimbursement, transparency, respect for candidate time, and the manner in which unsuccessful applicants are treated demonstrate how an institution exercises power and values people. A department that repeatedly misses deadlines, adds unexplained interviews, provides inconsistent information, or fails to notify rejected candidates may be communicating organizational dysfunction long before a candidate becomes an employee.

Implications for Faculty Applicants and Institutions

For applicants, the central implication is that rejection from an opaque search is weak evidence about personal scholarly worth. Fernandes et al. (2020) found that familiar publication and citation measures did not fully distinguish candidates with and without offers, while faculty-network studies show that institutional prestige and hiring hierarchy affect mobility (Clauset et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2021; Wapman et al., 2022). Applicants should continue to strengthen job-relevant evidence, but they should also recognize that some determinants are structural rather than individually controllable. This perspective does not make rejection inconsequential; it makes its meaning more accurate.

For universities, applicant experience should be treated as a quality indicator rather than a public-relations concern. A search that requires excessive labor, allows weeks of silence, or asks candidates to navigate inconsistent evaluative conditions is revealing something about the institution's governance before employment even begins. Conversely, a search that provides clear criteria, disciplined interviews, comparable visits, and timely communication demonstrates organizational competence and respect. Faculty hiring is therefore both a selection mechanism and an early encounter with institutional culture. Improving the process can strengthen equity while also helping universities compete for candidates who have alternatives.

Conclusion

Faculty hiring is difficult for legitimate reasons: appointments are consequential, vacancies may be rare, and departments must evaluate multidimensional work. Those facts do not justify a process that is longer, more interview-intensive, or more opaque than necessary. The evidence synthesized here shows a market in which applicants may submit many tailored dossiers, wait months for decisions, complete repeated high-stakes evaluations, and still receive little feedback (Fernandes et al., 2020). When those burdens operate alongside vague criteria, prestige hierarchy, committee bias, and cultural reluctance to challenge subjective judgments, process complexity can become a barrier rather than a safeguard. The most compelling reform principle is simple: every requirement should earn its place. Universities should be able to explain what information a document, interview, meeting, or approval contributes; why that information predicts success in the role; and how it will be compared across candidates. Structured criteria, progressive materials, fewer evaluative stages, standardized interviews, diversified committees, transparent timelines, and post-search audits all move the process toward that standard (Arevalo et al., 2025; Burrell & Richardson, 2023; O'Meara et al., 2020). These changes do not remove judgment from faculty hiring. They make judgment more accountable. The stakes justify that accountability. For applicants, one protracted or poorly managed search can consume months of work and, because of the annual academic cycle, delay access to comparable opportunities until the next year. For universities, the same search determines who gains entry to the professoriate and who will shape teaching, scholarship, mentoring, and institutional decision making. A faculty hiring process should therefore be judged not by how exhausting it is, but by whether it produces timely, transparent, job-relevant, and equitable decisions. When the process itself becomes the barrier, redesign is not an administrative convenience; it is a condition of credible academic meritocracy.

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