

Hiring a New Assistant Professor at a Large Mid-Level Public University

D. F. Barone, D. F. Graybill, and T. S. Critchfield, Illinois State University

Academic hiring is a search for individuals whose skills and credentials map well onto characteristics of the position being filled and of the institution attempting to fill it. The former varies across positions and cannot be addressed in generalities. The latter we illustrate for those currently in training for academic positions by referring to our own institution.

Description of Institution and Department

Illinois State University (ISU) is a public Research-Intensive University that was once a teachers college. It is located 130 miles south of Chicago and about 160 miles north of St. Louis in the town of Normal which, in combination with the adjacent city of Bloomington, is part of a metropolitan population of 150,000. ISU competes with other state universities for undergraduates not attending private universities or the state flagship university. Our 18,500 undergraduates are almost all from Illinois. In 2003, the average ACT score was 23.6 (middle 50% = 21-25). Additionally, ISU is home to 1,500 graduate students in 30 masters and seven doctoral programs.

The Psychology Department is one of the largest on campus. It has 38 full-time faculty lines and averages 500 majors and 500 minors. It provides thousands of general education seats in General, Social, Life-Span Developmental, and Personality Psychology, and in Introduction to Social-Science Statistics. It also provides thousands of seats in Educational Psychology and Adolescent Development to the large teacher-education programs on campus. The department has 150 graduate students, divided into three areas: master's in psychology (with sequences in Cognitive and Behavioral Sciences, Developmental, Industrial/Organizational-Social, and Quantitative Psychology), master's in clinical-counseling psychology, and specialist and doctoral programs in school psychology. About 50 graduate students are employed 8-10 hours per week by the department and assigned to

faculty members. Most other graduate students are employed throughout the university and in community placements.

As at many large state universities, undergraduate education dominates, but the faculty successfully integrates this mission with graduate education and research. The nominal faculty course load of four courses per semester is reduced by one for those with active scholarly programs, and by two for those involved in the School Psychology doctoral program. Many of our courses enroll over 100 students, and such courses receive double teaching credit. Thus, in a typical semester, the functional teaching load for psychology faculty members is two: one large and one smaller course, the latter at the advanced undergraduate or graduate level. Given the large faculty, professors need to prepare only a few courses that are within their central areas of competence. They also are expected to supervise research: graduate theses, dissertations, and undergraduate research apprenticeships. Many faculty also involve students in their teaching, both as paid graduate assistants and for-credit undergraduate teaching assistants. There is a strong faculty governance tradition, although incoming faculty members are protected from large service loads.

Hiring Needs and Practices

The Psychology Department hires faculty members whose activities demonstrate interest and acquisition of competencies in the above set of activities. Previous teaching experience (preferably as the instructor of record) and interest in teaching and mentoring undergraduates are very important. Having interest in a lower-level survey course is an asset; having experience as instructor or teaching assistant in such a course is even better. Applicants whose main teaching interests are advanced graduate seminars are not a good fit for us; neither are those who have been so focused on advancing a research agenda that they did not have the time or interest to teach as a graduate student. We do, however, want to hire applicants with clear research plans, as well as presentations and publications that demonstrate a commitment to scholarship.

Once we have identified the most promising applicants from portfolio reviews and telephone interviews, we invite them to campus. Faculty size up the applicant in individual or small-group meetings, but the research colloquium is the most important basis of evaluation. We look for depth of knowledge and broad research interest. We also evaluate the presentation for communication effectiveness, such as how interesting it is, and how well it gauges and adjusts to the audience's level of knowledge. More generally, we evaluate the candidate for confidence and sociability because introverts do not do well in lecture halls full of teenagers. Our faculty thrive on collaborative research with each other (in the absence of one's own cadre of doctoral students), so promise in this area is also evaluated.

Survival After the Hire

Because hiring and training new faculty members are expensive, every institution hopes to hire individuals whose skills and goals make them likely to succeed in the long run. Thus, the contingencies of academic survival always inform the hiring process.

At ISU, teaching weighs heavily into annual evaluations and decisions about promotion and tenure. Mediocre teachers may not receive annual raises, and it is impossible for a poor teacher to be tenured. Where teaching quality is concerned, the bar is set rather high. Each semester, the Psychology Department's instructors award one of the most conservative grade distributions on campus while achieving among the highest student ratings. Some faculty members who earned rave teaching reviews at a previous institution have garnered only average responses here.

Teaching assignments run the gamut from large lecture classes to small seminars to individual supervision of research and clinical work (as appropriate to the area of specialty), and most faculty members have regular experience with teaching in service courses that heavily enroll students with majors outside of psychology. Thus, an effective faculty member in our department is knowledgeable not only about psychology, but also about teaching and learning. Faculty members should attend not only to subject matter goals for their courses but also to process goals, by routinely asking questions such as "What class activities best suit the

interaction of the subject matter with the type of students enrolled in the course?” and “How can the success of my teaching activities be assessed most informatively?” In the latter case, there is a strong institutional culture emphasizing the application to teaching of a problem-solving orientation similar to that employed in research to teaching.

Candidates for promotion and tenure submit a teaching portfolio, containing examples of course materials and student products, and there is great interest in the degree to which the portfolio addresses the questions just mentioned. Scholarship on the process and outcomes of teaching also is valued. Overall, the portfolio should show that teaching is an integral part of a faculty member’s professional identity.

Research productivity also is a prerequisite to promotion and tenure. In the typical case, research and teaching are weighted equally in the faculty evaluation process. Although some formal on-campus support of research (e.g., laboratory start-up funds and seed grants) is available, in general resources are scarcer than at doctoral institutions. Faculty members who succeed at research have found creative ways to do it economically, or have obtained extramural funding.

Time for research also is scarcer than at doctoral institutions, so faculty members who succeed at research are good at multi-tasking and at organizing and supervising research teams who divide the burden of the research process. In general, we are impressed by applicants who have demonstrated the skill and motivation to bring research to fruition (even when doing so was difficult), and who appear to have a realistic grasp of the relationship between research ideas and resource practicalities.

Undergraduates often play a key role in research teams, and they receive valuable mentoring in the process. Although only a small minority of our undergraduates have research-related career goals, many report that work in faculty laboratories was the highlight of their undergraduate experience, and supervising student research assistants counts as a teaching contribution in faculty evaluations. In this regard, what is good for research

programs also promotes the teaching mission of the department. Above all, we seek faculty who embrace this synergy.