

Let's Retire the Term "Fit": Strategies to Improve Faculty Heterogeneity

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"Fit" is a nebulous, rather subjective term used not only in academia but also in many different workplaces as an exclusionary criterion for a job candidate. A person with influence in the hiring process determines—often after the interview—that a candidate does not "fit in" with the department, its personnel, culture, performance measures, or status in the discipline. In academia, the notion of "fit" is conceptualized as "the intersection between a job seeker's academic identity and the academic identities of the college/department to which the job seeker is applying" (Ball 2013). This is a fair definition from the perspective that a candidate's teaching and research agenda, graduate institution, level of teaching (i.e., graduate and/or undergraduate), teaching success (e.g., comprehensive teaching portfolios, including stellar teaching evaluations), and use of teaching assistants should be compatible with what the college or department requires. For example, a PhD recipient from an institution where teaching is prioritized is less likely to match well in a department that focuses primarily on research. In this instance, the term "fit" may be used *credibly* if a candidate does not have the academic experience and training that matches what is required by the job description and expected of the college and department.

Although the representation of women and minorities in political science has improved in recent years (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster 2016), the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities (especially women) in political science (and higher education in general) continues to lag significantly. Therefore, rectifying the dearth of women and minority faculty across disciplines is a key component in an institution's diversity and inclusion pursuits. However, candidates may be rejected for reasons that have no bearing on their ability to be a strong, productive, highly capable collegial member of the department, and political science is no exception. Rejected candidates tend to be "overrepresented" by groups that have been marginalized in society as well as the academy (Gasman 2016; O'Meara, Culpepper, and Templeton 2020; Smith et al. 2004; Taylor et al. 2020). In particular, this includes but is not limited to racial and ethnic minorities such as Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), Latinx, and Asians. There is a paucity of literature with regard to hiring discrimination related to sexual and gender identity-specific minorities (i.e., individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+), nonwhite immigrants, non-native English speakers, people older than 50, those with physical or mental disabilities, and those who are regarded as "clinically obese" (Reidinger 2020). However, it is surmised

that nonwhite individuals who are "intersectional"—that is, possessing three or more characteristics of marginalized groups—are even more likely to be passed over for hiring (Dill and Zambrana 2009; McCall 2005; Zinn and Dill 1996). As such, many departments across disciplines—including political science—continue to be composed of mostly (or entirely) middle-aged, white, heterosexual, (ostensibly) cis-gendered males (Gasman 2016; Muhs et al. 2012; Sensou and DiAngelo 2017; Smith et al. 2004; Taylor et al. 2020, 232; White-Lewis 2020). When asked why a candidate who is not a member of this homogeneous group was not hired for an opening but otherwise seemed to be qualified, the word "fit"—and reasons for why the candidate's rejection was based on it—often emerges in those conversations.

THE (POSSIBLE) EFFECTS OF "FIT" ON DIVERSITY EFFORTS

"Diversity" should not be considered a buzzword reflective of a particular point in time. Rather, disciplines may have been embracing diversity all along if the goal is to hire the best candidate who embodies the mission, goals, and objectives of a department—regardless of "group belonging." Unfortunately, this has not been the case for many disciplines, including political science. For centuries, academia has been considered a bastion of white, heterosexual, cis-gendered males, despite thousands of women, minorities, and other marginalized groups who have since earned graduate degrees and entered the profession. However, many departments seem recalcitrant in the face of interviewing—and possibly hiring—a candidate who is not representative of the perceived "hegemony." Many institutions have consciously decided to address the issue of diversity in recent years. However, this amounts to little more than recognizing the lack of diversity on campus, then hiring a "coordinator" or "director" of diversity and inclusion who often is hampered by the administration (and/or faculty) from implementing measures that are meaningful, impactful, and long-lasting.

To address possible "diversity" concerns, women (especially white women) often—but not always—are hired as a means to rectify a department's "diversity problem" because of their status as a "protected class" based on gender, but racially representative of the majority in academia (Hall 2006; Hunt et al. 2012; Taylor et al. 2020, 234; Turner 2002). However, review of the table entitled "Race, Ethnicity, and Gender of Full-Time Faculty" in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2022) reveals that numerous schools do not have any women faculty members. In many more schools, there are few—or no—BIPOC

faculty members. However, certain departments across academia (especially ethnic/minority/gender studies and social service) are replete with women and minority faculty members in full-time positions (Taylor et al. 2020, 232–33; Williams and Ceci 2015); Asian faculty members are represented strongest in STEM disciplines (Taylor et al. 2020, 232–33). In addition, the percentage of full-time faculty based on race/ethnicity and gender in postsecondary institutions as

(POSSIBLE) REASONS USED TO DEFEND THE NOTION OF “FIT” (AND HAMPER DIVERSITY EFFORTS)

Just as the term “fit” is vague, reasons given for denying a candidate based on the criterion also vary. Following are possible reasons that may be used to justify not hiring a candidate (but that use “fit” as the catchall term for the decision):

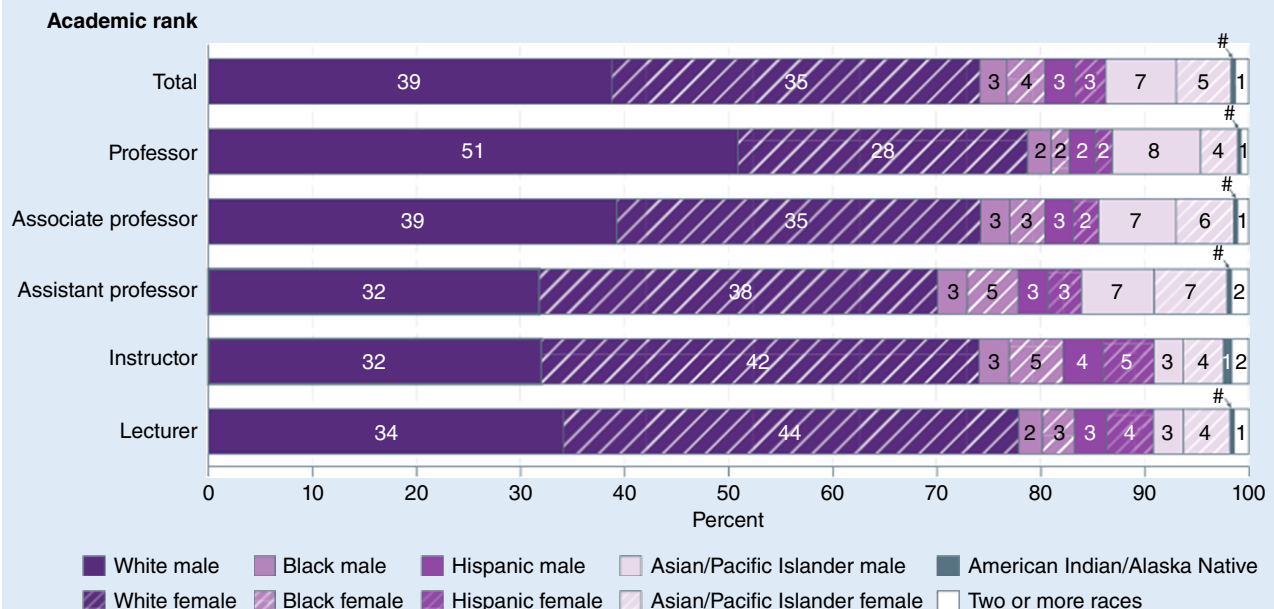
Candidates may be rejected for reasons that have no bearing on their ability to be a strong, productive, highly capable collegial member of the department, and political science is no exception.

of 2020 is shown in figure 1. Unfortunately, the data do not address other marginalized groups and neither are they reflected in the figure. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the number or percentage of LGBTQIA+ faculty members or other marginalized groups. However, the literature regarding the presence of—and challenges for—queer faculty members, as well as the research they produce, has increased considerably in the past two decades (Bilimoria and Stewart 2009; Candler, Johnson, and Anderson 2009; Cech and Waidzunus 2021; Cramer and Ford 2011; Renn 2010; Shrader 2016). Intersectional candidates (e.g., queer women who belong to a racial minority group) may be more likely to be marginalized further and often more likely to be rejected based on the notion of “fit.”

- *The “boys’ club” and “fit.”* Fisher and Kinsey (2014) explored the nature and power of the “academic boys’ club,” highlighting how male-colleague bonding based on gender could make it difficult for a woman to join a department. They used the term “homosocial desire” to indicate this level of bonding. “Homosocial desire,” or “homosociality,” is viewed as “nonsexual attractions for members of one’s sex” that “promotes clear distinctions between men and women through segregation in social institutions” (Bird 1996, 121; Lipman-Blumen 1976). These notions are bolstered by the concept of “hegemonic masculinity,” which contends that patterns of male dominance—particularly over women—are maintained through practice. In this sense, “practice” means keeping women—especially women of

Figure 1

Distribution of Full-Time Faculty in Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender (Fall 2020)



Source: US Department of Education (2021).

color—out of settings that allow this level of bonding and the reinforcement of perceived gender superiority (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). The existence of these concepts suggests that diversity (at least as it relates to adding women) will not happen until men confront the exclusionary nature of their professional relationship in the academy (Fisher and Kinsey 2014, 60; see also Bird 1996; Lipman-Blumen 1976). Men who belong to male-only departments

homophobic. The problem is using the word that, arguably, implies a lack of understanding of different cultures and wariness of those who are perceived to be “different.”

(POTENTIALLY) HELPFUL STRATEGIES FOR RETIRING THE WORD “FIT” IN HIRING CONSIDERATIONS

Following are strategies that hiring committees—and departments in general—can use to effectively evaluate “diversity”

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may or may not realize that the rejection of female candidates is a tacit expression of the “boys’ club,” preservation of a “masculine hegemony,” and nonacceptance of the notions of diversity and inclusion. However, in some instances, there may be diverse men as part of the club—perhaps one or more cis-gendered men of color or, in certain disciplines, gay men (Tilcsik, Anteby, and Knight 2015). However, if the discipline is strongly represented by women but no female candidates are hired (or are hired but compelled to quit, or are tenure-track but denied tenure), it is reasonable to assume that the “boys’ club mentality” may have influenced a department’s inability to hire and/or retain female faculty.

- *Microaggressions and implicit bias.* Microaggressions and implicit bias, to an extent, are intertwined with the notion of fit—even if members of the hiring committee do not realize it. Nevertheless, candidates still try to put their “best face forward”; however, the microaggressions and implicit bias are often another reason for the term “fit” to be used against them. For example, committee members telling BIPOC candidates that they “are articulate” or that they “do not believe in race” are microaggressions that may not seem offensive (Sue 2010). Unfortunately, those microaggressions (intentional or unintentional) may influence a committee member (or the entire hiring committee) to pass on a candidate, using “lack of fit” as a reason.
- *“Fit” and “social interaction.”* For many hiring committees, the notion of fit has a decidedly “social” connotation as well. The appropriate candidate becomes someone with whom committee members and other faculty can see themselves sharing a drink, dinner, and social activities. Although this social aspect can enhance the overall cohesiveness of a department, the assumption that a candidate will not enjoy certain activities is shortsighted. Candidates are expected to remain professional at dinner, during happy hour, and even in the restroom. Moreover, they usually are nervous and their desire to be “candid” is restrained, which may be interpreted as guarded, aloof, or “no fun.”
- Many of those who use the word “fit” to justify rejecting a candidate are *not* inherently bigoted, misogynistic, or

candidates for hire and move beyond using the term “fit” to justify hiring considerations:

- If the hiring committee does not already do this, consider meeting before beginning the search to discuss in detail what the committee—and the department—*need* and *want* from a prospective hire. Encourage all members to be honest about the type of colleague they hope to bring aboard. Naturally, the focus should be on candidates’ credentials and whether they are “in sync” with the department’s overall mission, goals, and objectives. Consider a full department meeting as well; non-committee faculty members—especially those from marginalized communities—may provide valuable insight that the committee can use to make its decision.
- Departments may consider getting to know faculty and perhaps students that represent marginalized communities in other departments. Consider objectively reading their published work; look for commonalities in teaching and research or novel approaches that may inform your own work; participate in academic presentations hosted by faculty or graduate students from marginalized communities; and invite them to events or functions hosted by the department. Find colleagues in the discipline from other colleges and institutions, and reach out to them to show respect for their work and perhaps offer to collaborate on a project (but do not offer to collaborate on their work unless invited).
- Political science is one of several disciplines with caucuses and organizations that represent marginalized groups. They exist primarily as “safe spaces” where scholars can have their voice heard and identify with others like them. If committee members (and any faculty members) want to learn more about these scholars, first review their website or social media; then, if possible, reach out to someone you know who belongs to the group. Also, consider reading papers and watching plenary sessions from their conferences. There are many highly intelligent, capable individuals who belong to marginalized groups and who are scholars, peers, and colleagues in every sense. Finally, attend a conference first as an observer to learn more;

through empathy, learning, and eventual allyship, the right to participate can be earned.

- Take an active interest in the hiring process. Hiring new faculty can be perceived as “tedious”: committee members must slog through dozens—if not hundreds—of application portfolios to narrow the pool to a manageable few for interviews and campus visits; ask pertinent questions about

- “Broaden your horizons” regarding research agendas and methods. Not everyone uses the same tools or wants to do the same research. Instead of viewing a candidate’s research agenda as “too narrow” (and a reason for rejection), committee members should consider that a narrower research agenda can help the professor (and the department) to stand out more in the discipline—especially if the candidate is

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candidates’ teaching and research; and get an overall “feel” for them as potential colleagues. Often, one or two committee members do most of the “heavy lifting”: drafting the job announcement, establishing the interview schedule, and screening the applicants. When all committee members participate, diversity efforts are enhanced because one member may see promise in an applicant who otherwise would have been rejected. Moreover, committees sometimes highlight faculty members who are from a marginalized group—not as “window dressing” in an attempt to court diversity but rather to ask about their experience in the interview process and how that led to their hiring. These faculty members can advise about questions to ask or events in which to engage candidates that encourages them to feel less alienated during the process. By making a commitment (although time consuming) to thoroughly examine the portfolios, the committee may interview a great candidate that otherwise would have been overlooked.

- Meet with other departments that have hired with a focus on diversity and therefore resulted in a diverse and inclusive group. Workplaces that are both diverse and inclusive are “vibrant” and “productive” (Bush 2021); if a department is not diverse, then understanding how others achieved it is an important first step. Consider forming a “work team” with members from those other departments, including but not limited to “faculty members, department staff, graduate students, undergraduate students, alumni no longer on campus, and an expert in the area from outside the department” (Nunes 2021).
- Pay attention to an applicant’s “diversity statement” because it has meaning—especially for those candidates from marginalized groups. The diversity statement submitted by candidates often reflects their experiences inside and outside of academia and how those experiences shaped them to be the instructor or researcher that they have become. If candidates are from a marginalized community, their statements frequently capture an anecdote that turned a previously negative experience into something positive. Likewise, statements from applicants in overrepresented groups (e.g., white, male, cis-gendered, and straight) usually reflect how they encountered other groups (as students and/or instructors) who helped them expand their thinking to view those different from them in a more positive light.

publishing regularly and is recognized as an “expert” in that topic.

- The “coordinator” or “director of diversity and inclusion” is a valuable resource to a department planning to hire. Invite them to a meeting before advertising a position for their insight on how to relate to candidates from a marginalized group. Many coordinators and directors are well trained in how institutions should address microaggressions and implicit bias—particularly in a candidate’s or existing faculty member’s evaluation (Alexander-Floyd 2015). They may be a member of a marginalized group with firsthand experience of prejudice. Therefore, it is beneficial for a department that is primed to hire new faculty to consult with this individual on its campus.
- Use educational skills and background to learn about marginalized communities. Because most faculty members have engaged in research at some point in their career, they should use that skillset to learn about marginalized groups on their own. Read histories, biographies, blogs, and diaries; visit the museum and the library; listen to recordings of oral histories; and watch TV shows that project strong, positive images of representation. Be willing to listen if group members choose to share their struggle. Do not look for yourself in these narratives because people like you are not necessarily in them. Become “uncomfortable” in learning; be mindful that in learning about the struggles of marginalized groups, anger, guilt, shame, or defensiveness toward what you are learning may be experienced. Committee members who belong to non-marginalized groups should allow themselves to be uncomfortable but open-minded. After all, it is another group’s experience; at the very least, be open to empathy. Finally, give special attention to learning about members of marginalized groups within the discipline—some of whom you may be interviewing in the future.

For largely homogeneous political science and other academic departments that accept their institution’s quest for diversity, these suggestions may help hiring committees to identify well-qualified candidates from marginalized groups (especially intersectional candidates). Of course, only one person can be hired for each full-time job, and a department cannot hire every qualified candidate. However, it is hoped

that going forward, academic departments—particularly in political science—will give more attention to candidates who otherwise might be rejected because of “fit”—especially because those from marginalized groups are more likely to experience this rejection. The subjectivity of the word dismisses the educational journey of candidates and reduces them to a binary outcome: they do/do not fit, they are/are not “good enough for us.” Therefore, the word “fit” used to justify not hiring a candidate must be retired.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

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