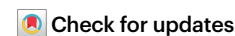


Cluster hires without retention efforts will not diversify the academy

Kimberly E. Chaney & Alexandra Garr-Schultz



Hiring clusters has become a common strategy for increasing faculty diversity, but little attention is paid to what happens to these clusters after they are hired. To achieve their aim of diversifying the academy, universities must also focus on retaining their cluster hires.

Despite efforts to increase faculty diversity at US institutions, faculty members of colour remain underrepresented¹. One common strategy to promote faculty diversity is cluster hires, defined as hiring two or more faculty members who conduct related research within or across multiple fields^{2,3}. For example, 88% of the top 25 US public universities (ranked by U.S. News and World Report) have had cluster hiring initiatives focused on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the past 5 years⁴.

At times, the research topic of the cluster hire might itself signal a focus on DEI, such as a cluster hire in diversity science or who will ‘advance equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives’. Proponents argue that hiring clusters increases the likelihood that the candidate pool will be diverse² and might increase the likelihood that candidates from underrepresented groups will accept a position owing to a perceived commitment by the university to diversify the academy and built-in camaraderie.

However, merely completing a cluster hire is not sufficient to achieve the desired results. If hired individuals encounter issues that lead to their departure, the institution will fail to achieve the benefits of diversification. Thus, universities need to focus not just on hiring but also on how to retain cluster hires, particularly those aimed at promoting an institution’s commitment to DEI.

Cultural adjustments

To effectively leverage cluster hires to diversify a department, the department should prepare for cultural adjustments that embrace DEI values, because cultural misalignment with existing defaults has been identified as a barrier to retention⁵. Moreover, departments should lay the groundwork for adjustments in advance of the arrival of cluster hires. For example, prior to launching a cluster hire search, department members should interrogate potential individual, departmental, and broader university or academic biases via externally conducted climate assessments and reflections; learn about shifting norms of equity; and grow their own cultural competence via workshops with university diversity offices or external experts. Doing this will prepare faculty to support members of a future cluster hire and ensure that they actively shape and take responsibility for the climate of their department.

Reflecting on climate survey results might increase comfort in discussing discrimination and highlight policies and practices that can be

revised to promote equity. For example, reflecting on current practices might reveal ways in which certain work styles (such as working alone) are valued more highly than others (such as collaboration), or identify meetings scheduled at times that are not accessible to faculty members with family care responsibilities. Beginning such cultural adjustments early will facilitate the success of cluster hire faculty members and identify opportunities for improvement that can continue to be built in partnership with them after their arrival.

Buy-in for these types of collaborative effort among pre-existing department faculty members is essential. Without such buy-in, new hires might find the climate inhospitable to them and their research, increasing their likelihood of departure. Although the addition of multiple faculty members and graduate students who study diversity science will inevitably elicit and/or influence ongoing conversations about DEI topics in a department, it is imperative that these conversations are viewed as ongoing growth opportunities rather than personal attacks or evidence for a lack of cultural ‘fit’ between the new hires and the department.

Sustained openness and ongoing improvement are crucial for cluster retention and are most easily accomplished when departmental and administrative leadership have explicitly indicated that DEI efforts are a priority and that they are prepared to be accountable for those adjustments beyond the point of hiring new faculty members. Continued action from departments and institutions (for example, yearly workshops) signals a continued commitment to faculty members hired through a cluster, increasing retention.

Equitable support

A cluster hire serves as a cohort of peers who are (considering) entering a new environment together and are likely to rely on one another for support during negotiations and onboarding, especially among junior faculty members. Thus, it is imperative that universities are consistent in their negotiations, provision of resources, treatment and expectations across candidates. For example, salary offers should not differ among potential cluster hire members of similar rank and experience, particularly along lines of racial privilege and marginalization. Equity is also imperative across other resources (for example, start-up packages, lab space and teaching requirements). Early cues of inequality during negotiations (probably made apparent by communication between cluster hire faculty members either before or after hiring) signals a lack of behavioural alignment with a university’s stated commitment to DEI, and will negatively affect hires’ perceived value and the likelihood of their retention.

Universities should consider the utility of collective negotiations for members of a cluster hire. Sharing knowledge about who has offers – if approved by each person with an offer – can enable potential hires to ensure they are receiving equitable resources. Similarly, departments might consider having a group oversee these negotiations, rather than one individual, to ensure biases do not create inequality at this early

stage. For example, the search committee or a union representative could be involved in negotiations to ensure that each job candidate is receiving equitable resources.

Building community

Feeling connected and included is linked to retention and job satisfaction. Thus, universities must make space for members of the cluster to build communities alongside their broader departments and university divisions during the onboarding process. That is, departments and universities should actively facilitate and provide resources for community building among cluster members, as well as across the department and institution. For example, they could offer funds for writing retreats off campus for scholars from marginalized backgrounds. Although a cluster hire inherently offers some connection, members of the cluster might have different backgrounds and experiences, thereby necessitating unique types of additional community.

Mentoring

Mentoring is an integral part of success for faculty members, especially for individuals with marginalized identities⁶. Therefore, it is imperative that members of a cluster hire receive effective mentorship. However, the logistics of this mentorship should be considered carefully. If a department is not diverse, an assigned mentor who holds many privileged identities might be underequipped to mentor scholars from marginalized backgrounds who face unique barriers in academia. At the same time, scholars of colour often carry high service loads. Thus, additional support might be needed for existing faculty with marginalized identities who might be tasked with mentoring several new faculty members.

In addition to matching hires with existing faculty members for mentorship, departments and cluster members might benefit from diversifying the ranks within a cluster hire so that a more senior scholar can mentor more junior scholars within the cluster. Furthermore, departments should encourage mentoring from faculty in a related department or provide resources for external mentoring through professional organizations such as the [National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity](#) or [WellAcademic](#).

Evaluation

Scholars focused on diversity science are likely to face challenges to their research from multiple sources. Research on diversity science might be deemed ‘divisive’ and therefore prone to hostility from the public in online discourse⁷. This unique stressor might limit faculty resources and scholarly productivity. Further, cluster members’ scholarship might be deemed ‘specialized’ and therefore more suitable for lower prestige journals⁸, limiting scholarly recognition from colleagues and professional societies. In turn, departments might deem the productivity or prestige of these scholars as insufficient for promotion or tenure, leading to low retention rates.

Moreover, new (and potentially junior) members of a cluster hire might be seen as experts with ‘fresh ideas’ by new colleagues. Consequently, they might be asked to carry a substantial portion of a department’s DEI efforts. Furthermore, faculty members with marginalized identities (particularly junior individuals) might become beacons for students who encounter discrimination in the department, leading to additional mentoring and challenges navigating reports of discrimination by more senior colleagues. Although these efforts might align with the stated values of cluster members and departments, such service work is often emotionally taxing, time consuming and stressful⁹; the work is often not valued in tenure, promotion, and merit decisions¹⁰, exacerbating pay disparities.

In addition, faculty members with marginalized identities and/or working in diversity science might be actively penalized. For example, student evaluations are notoriously biased against professors from marginalized backgrounds¹¹. In more concerning scenarios,

junior faculty members leading DEI efforts might face subtle or blatant pushback from senior faculty members, including retaliation. Thus, departments who hire a diversity science cluster need to be prepared to protect these faculty members from internal and external discrimination and to recognize how their systems for promotion and tenure might be biased against these scholars if they rely on journal metrics and student teaching evaluations while undervaluing service.

Departments should have a plan for how to take the above realities into account and support the cluster’s success in tenure and promotion. For example, they could reward enacted service (including ‘unofficial’ DEI labour, such as supporting students facing discrimination), set clear expectations around service work and communicate them in advance, or reduce service loads for new cluster hires. Further, promotion and tenure cases should include an advocate who can articulate how faculty from marginalized backgrounds are affected by biases in teaching evaluations or peer review and allow for other metrics of impact in these areas (for example, peer review of teaching). Finally, university DEI offices should provide resources to help departments to address and cope with retaliation and hostile public discourse targeting faculty.

Empower cluster hires

Hiring a diversity-related cluster on its own does not achieve DEI goals. The benefits of the cluster approach can be fully realized both for new faculty members and a pre-existing academic unit only through continued and sustained efforts to retain a cluster. Importantly, the recommendations we have provided for countering the unique challenges potentially faced by members of cluster hires in diversity science and the department who hires them are not exhaustive – members of a cluster hire must feel empowered to speak up and share their ideas and recommendations.

If all cluster members are within one department or area, they might perceive some capital when choosing how to vote on issues or when to speak up against inequitable decisions, policies or statements, because they will be part of a group of faculty members with similar ideologies. However, this capital might still be challenging to use or feel precarious for junior faculty and faculty members who have been historically marginalized by the academy. Thus, it is imperative to intentionally and regularly solicit feedback from cluster hires about what challenges they are facing and what support mechanisms would be most helpful. Ensuring that cluster hire faculty members have a voice and feel empowered to express themselves is essential for cluster retention.

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Author contributions

The authors contributed equally to all aspects of the article.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.