

It's All in What You Ask Questions for Search Committees

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Search committees often have difficulty determining if a candidate is aware of and responsive to women's issues. When prospective employees are asked, "Are you concerned about and supportive of women's issues?" they will invariably give an affirmative reply. Unfortunately, that gives little indication of their level of concern or commitment. This paper contains a variety of questions that will help elicit useful information about candidates' concern about issues that affect women.

Many of these questions do not have a "right" or a "wrong" answer. Some are open ended to draw out the candidate's opinions and attitudes. Many of the questions can easily be adapted to apply to minority and disabled persons. Some questions will be appropriate only to certain disciplines.

These questions should be asked by both men and women on the search committee. Having only women ask questions about these issues may give a candidate the impression that equity issues are not important to the institution but are important only to women. Because many of the candidates will not have thought about these questions in advance, the questions will, in some situations, be useful in demonstrating how quickly candidates can think.

Search committees, of course, have many items on their agendas and cannot ask all or even most of these questions. Some of these questions may be incorporated into other questions or contribute to informal discussion within the interview process. Asking the questions also may be used as a way to raise awareness of women's issues among candidates and search committee members themselves. The list is not a definitive one, but it is intended to help committees develop questions that are appropriate for their own institutions and situations. In addition, to aiding search committees, this paper may be of use to presidents, deans, provosts, affirmative action officers, and commissions on the status of women. Several of the questions could also be used by those outside of academe to fill positions.

The questions are divided into three sections: general questions to ask both prospective administrators and faculty, and questions appropriate for prospective administrators, and questions appropriate for faculty candidates.

GENERAL QUESTIONS

Equity

- How have you demonstrated your commitment to women's issues in your current position?
- Which of your achievements in the area of equity for women gives you the most satisfaction?
- Which of your accomplishments in the area of equity for women was the hardest to achieve? Why?
- How would you demonstrate your concern for equity for women if you were hired?
- Our institution is committed to fostering equity for women. What does "coeducation" mean to you? What steps would you take to ensure that genuine coeducation takes place on our campus?
- In your opinion, what are the three major problems for women on your campus?
- What are some issues of importance to minority women on your campus?
- In general, how are minority women's issues different from women's issues and minority men's issues?
- How has the women's movement affected your professional life?
- Do you think that most women's equity issues have been resolved? Is it time to turn our attention to other issues?
- How are general issues in higher education related to women's issues? What is the link?
- Institutions collect and analyze data but often that data is not broken down by sex. When it is important to do analysis by sex?

Informal Support

- In what ways have you mentored, supported, or encouraged women on your campus?

- Have you ever worked actively on behalf of any of the following? If so, how?
 - women's studies program at your college/university
 - affirmative action policies, programs, or activities on behalf of women and women's issues
 - sexual harassment policies
 - rape crisis programs, including judicial procedures, and so forth
 - women's support groups at your college/university
 - child care arrangements for faculty, staff, and students
- Describe activities—including articles, interviews, and speeches—in which you have taken part that demonstrate a public commitment to women's equity.
- What are your views about women's studies and new scholarship on women?
- To whom do you go for advice about women's issues?
- What do you think of older women returning to school? Do you think that they need special services or other help? If so, what would you suggest?
- In your current position, have you ever seen a woman treated unfairly? How would/did you handle it?
- Many female graduate students face an increasingly chilly climate at a time when they are in transition between being a student and a professional. Can you describe some of the ways in which you think men and women graduate students are treated differently by faculty? By administrators? By other students? How would you promote the interests of female graduate students?

Climate

- In what ways do you think women faculty and administrators are treated differently from their male counterparts? In what ways may such different treatment place the women at a relative disadvantage in their personal and professional development? What would you do to help change this situation?
- How have you included women colleagues in off-campus activities, such as professional conferences and social events?
- How much time do you spend informally (such as having lunch) with male colleagues and with female colleagues?
- What have you done to welcome new women colleagues to campus?

- Have you ever collaborated with a woman on a research project or publication? In what way?
- Have you ever conducted research on gender-related issues?
- Have you ever attended any activities such as lectures or films which were sponsored by women students' organizations?

QUESTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE ADMINISTRATORS

Some of these will be more appropriate to ask candidates for specific positions, such as presidents, deans, associate deans, or department chairs.

Formal Support

- In your current position, what is your relationship to the affirmative action officer? Have you ever sought his or her help in recruiting?
- How would you work to achieve equity for women scholars in terms of promotion and salary?
- How have you supported women students' organizations on campus? For example, have you arranged for funding or office space?
- How do you view the roles of a women's center, a commission on women, and a women's studies program?
- Is there a women's center at your institution? How do you feel about women's centers? What is your relationship to the women's center?
- At your current institution, is there a commission on women? What is your relationship to the commission? Do you think having a commission on women is a good idea? How do you envision working with one here?

Staff Related

- How many of the top people at your previous institution were women? What did you do to encourage hiring more women?
- Of the people you hired in your current position, what percentage are women?
- What was the highest position to which you appointed a woman?
- Have you been involved in a salary review at your current institution?

- How will you ensure equity for women's salaries?
- What do you think about more women than men being hired as part-time faculty with low salary, few benefits, and no place on the tenure track?
- What are your feelings about stopping the tenure clock while a woman is on maternity leave?
- What are the best ways to get people to think about and be aware of women's issues? How have you personally influenced others regarding women's issues?
- Generally women students do not participate in class as often as men. How have you helped members of your staff or department deal with this issue?

Direct Encouragement

- Which committee at your current institution would you consider the most powerful? How many women are on it? How many women have you appointed to it?
- Men and women students often have different experiences at college that affect their personal and professional development. How would you make the college environment more equitable for women?
- What do you think of having a nonsexist language policy for university communications? Would you implement one here?
- How would/did you address a lack of women students or faculty members in specific departments and divisions?

Other

- How serious a problem do you consider sexual harassment on your present campus? What have you done about it? Is there a grievance procedure for harassment problems? How does it work?
- At your current institution, did you ever observe or hear of examples of sexual harassment? How would you deal with a similar instance if it happened here?
- How did/would you deal with faculty members who say disparaging things about women?
- What women's issues have you addressed in speeches you have given during the last few years?

- What is your relationship to the Pan-Hellenic society on your current campus? How do you regulate or oversee fraternity and sorority activities?
- Have you raised money for women's sports?
- How have you worked to integrate women into sports and related activities, including the band?
- Do you belong to any clubs that restrict membership by sex? (Such memberships, particularly when held by male administrators, may be a potential source of embarrassment when cited by student groups and/or the faculty senate.)

QUESTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE FACULTY

Women's Studies

- Do you regularly read or subscribe to any journals that deal with scholarship about women?
- What scholarship about women have you read lately? Whose work on women have you found most related to your research? Your curriculum?
- How do you incorporate new scholarship on women into undergraduate coursework? Into your research? Into graduate coursework? With your graduate students? How do you help your colleagues do so?
- Which women scholars or authors do you include in your syllabi? Reading lists?
- Some people say that separate women's studies courses are preferable to integrating scholarship about women into the curriculum; others believe the reverse. How does one balance these points of view? What priority and emphasis would you give to generating research on the one hand, and then mainstreaming it on the other?
- Have any of your students ever written about women in their term papers? Their dissertations or theses?

Campus Environment

- In most classes women students don't participate as much as men. What have you done to encourage women to participate in your classes? Has it worked?
- Approximately how many men have you nominated for fellowships, awards, and prizes? How many women?
- How many teaching or research assistants have you hired in the last two years? How many were women?
- (for science faculty) Research shows that women in science often have lower aspirations than their male colleagues. Have you encountered this trend in your classes? What do you do about it?
- (for science faculty) What differences have you perceived in men and women in the laboratory? Do you tend to have single-sex lab teams? Why?
- How have you encouraged women students to enter traditionally male fields?
- What is your experience with faculty (and student) hostility to women and women's issues? Have you seen or experienced any sort of backlash or denial, where people say, in effect, "I don't want to hear about it"? How do you deal with backlash and denial?
- Have any students ever complained to you about sexual harassment or discrimination in any work with professors or staff? If so, how did you respond?
- How do you feel about teaching students older than yourself?
- (for physical education faculty) What impact has Title IX had at your current institution? What do you think about that?

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