

THE HIRING DILEMMA: A CASE ABOUT CHAMPIONING FOR GENDER EQUITY HIRING AT A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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This case study addressed the challenges and concerns of championing a female faculty candidate in a higher education setting. The story depicts a newly hired female accounting professor who showed promising career potential and quickly moved on to another flagship state institution for a more lucrative offer. Her departure drew animosity and criticism from colleagues of her original institution. The young professor was criticized for receiving a high entry-level salary, being granted maternity leave one year after her hiring, and leaving for another position with less than three years of commitment. Even the administrator of her original institution somewhat felt the heat of her betrayal and disloyalty. However, the female professor had every right to request maternity leave and seek professional advancement. The problem at this juncture is that the search committee members of her original institution later intentionally ignored the qualified female candidates because they feared duplicating this negative hiring experience. Readers of this case will delve into the potential benefits of promoting paid leave and supporting gender-equity hiring.

INTRODUCTION

Southern State University (SSU) is a regional institution that takes tremendous pride in serving its 10,000 students from the state's eastern side. It was well-known for its excellent academic programs and strong diversity initiatives. The College of Business was accredited by the AACSB (Advanced Accreditation Council for School of Business). In addition, the President of SSU often publicly promotes the institution's safe, inclusive and friendly working environment and employee benefits. As a result, many talented and diverse young scholars have sought teaching opportunities at this unique institution.

Dr. Johnson, the Dean of the College of Business of SSU, was quite pleased with the available pool of accounting faculty. Currently, the college is searching for an accounting tenure-track assistant professor who would teach a 3-3 workload, conduct research, and perform administrative duties regularly. He remembered seeing that several talented young female doctoral candidates applied for the job. Their academic record, work experience, publications, and reputation in their graduate institution are all imposing. However, when the search committee chair informed Dr. Johnson about the three candidates to be interviewed, he was somewhat perplexed by the list of names. None of the three visiting candidates was female. Instead, they were all middle-aged male professors who had teaching experience from another university.

Dr. Johnson could not contain his curiosity, so he asked the search chair about the committee members' views on those female candidates. He believed those female candidates were as qualified as Dr. Sarah Smith. The search chair gave Dr. Johnson a direct and blatant explanation. He stated the members were wary due to Dr. Sarah Johnson's "betrayal incident." They would prefer not to make the same mistake again. The college just could not afford to hire a new faculty member and lose that individual again in a short time.

PROFESSOR SARAH SMITH'S ACADEMIC JOURNEY

When Dr. Smith, a young female African-American accounting professor, applied for the SSU three and a half years ago, the search committee members were excited about her hiring. She brought in impressive work experience and impeccable academic record, but she was also considered "the poster child" as the institution and program emphasized its inclusive and gender-equity hiring. Dr. Smith expressed her ambition and interest in guiding students to form an accounting club and engage in service-learning and research projects. Her energy, enthusiasm, and affable personality showed great potential in earning students' attention and support. The salary of an accounting faculty of a business school usually is commensurate with the market value. So, the College of Business agreed to pay Dr. Smith \$110,000 annually (an amount that equates to the salary of an Associate Dean of other schools and colleges on campus) to ensure that no other institutions would lure her away. Although this amount aligns with the national average of tenure-track accounting professors at the entry-level salary, it is the highest salary given to any faculty member in the College of Business (except for the Dean and the Associate Dean). This decision made some more experienced tenured faculty upset and jealous because this rookie teacher would get paid more than many of her colleagues.

In her first year at SSU, Dr. Smith's teaching performance was impressive. She received well-above-average student evaluations. Her peer-evaluation comments

were also positive. She kept her promise by supervising a couple of undergraduate research fellows and eventually had their work published in a scholarly journal. She even volunteered to fill in a Faculty Senate seat for a retired teacher. The tenured committee members were pleased with her overall performance.

As her first year came to a close and a new academic year was on the horizon, Dr. Smith became pregnant. During her pregnancy, she carried a three-four teaching load. Her teaching evaluation scores were maintained. However, she inevitably canceled some class meetings due to unforeseen doctor visits. As a result, she became less available to attend student club meetings. The college also needed another alternative representative to attend the Faculty Senate meeting. After her child was born, Dr. Smith was granted maternity leave for a full Spring Semester at the end of her second year. Due to the maternity leave, Dr. Johnson searched for an adjunct teacher to substitute for Dr. Smith. The adjunct filled the role, but there were some complaints about their substandard performance. Dr. Smith's accounting students missed her presence and teaching enthusiasm.

In the Fall semester of her third year at SSU, Dr. Smith returned to work after her maternity leave. Before the Thanksgiving vacation, she had scheduled a meeting with the Associate Dean and Dr. Johnson. During this meeting, Dr. Smith submitted her resignation, leaving both the Associate Dean and Dr. Johnson in shock. Dr. Smith received an offer from a flagship university in the neighboring state. She expressed her gratitude for the support from all her colleagues and her enjoyment of working at the SSU. However, the new teaching appointment was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity she could not pass. Dr. Smith's departure came as a quick surprise, the College of Business did not even get enough time to announce a job vacancy searching for a new candidate. Facing the personnel shortage in the accounting discipline, the other accounting faculty had to fill in for Dr. Smith's absence.

A Case of “Waste of Time and Money” or “Being a Champion for Gender Equity Hiring?”

Since Dr. Smith's departure, the faculty of the College of Business frequently discussed how to conduct a new search and the impact of what some have dubbed “the unpleasant” experience with her. Some people thought Dr. Smith was selfish and took advantage of the system. Some criticized that she needed to express her interest in leaving sooner. Her quick decision to move to another institution was interpreted as a lack of loyalty. Furthermore, a few individuals expressed that her hiring was a complete waste of time and money. During Dr. Smith's maternity leave, the college paid for additional adjunct faculty to cover her absence. Colleagues also performed some of her administrative duties and service requirements (i.e., supervision of the student club and Faculty Senate meetings).

One teacher even openly expressed, “our institution is not a charity agency; she cannot just take and go without contributing anything.” These complaints caused the research committee to be extra judicious about considering another young female faculty candidate for the open position.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Johnson was somewhat anxious about this accounting faculty search. As people gradually returned to work, the employment rate dropped to a record low level. After reviewing the applicant pool, Dr. Johnson was quite optimistic and excited about getting another young individual to give the college a little boost. Due to the pandemic, a couple of senior faculty members retired. As an institution that champions diversity and equality, he believed his college was heading in the right direction to serve the iGeneration students. However, when he saw the list of interviewees, he was disappointed about the lack of youthfulness among the candidates. Dr. Johnson was also surprised by the response of the search committee chair. Has the departure of Dr. Smith made everyone disfavor young female candidates? He wondered if the search committee had made the right decision. Will aiming at “old and experienced” individuals lead to a “backward thinking” trend of being too traditional and conservative?