Best Practices for Hiring Departments

This document offers guidance for philosophy departments seeking to hire candidates into academic positions in philosophy at institutions of higher learning. In recent years, many institutions have offered fewer tenure-track positions and more teaching-track positions that come with little or no research expectations but higher teaching loads. The process of hiring for a temporary position can be different from the process of hiring for an ongoing or tenure-track position. The process of hiring for a position that emphasizes teaching can be different from the process of hiring for a position that emphasizes research. Differences in hiring practices will depend upon the nature of the particular position and institution. But often these differences are a matter of degree, not in kind. This document attempts to offer guidelines that could be useful to a broad range of hiring departments.

All aspects of the hiring process must conform to the APA’s Statement on Nondiscrimination and Statement on Sexual Harassment.

Anyone concerned about violations of the Statement on Nondiscrimination should refer to the APA’s Discrimination Complaint Procedure. For assistance with discrimination and sexual harassment issues, hiring departments should consult the APA’s Ombudsperson Concerning Discrimination and Sexual Harassment.

The best practice is to explicitly appoint a regular faculty member as the diversity officer for each search. The officer is responsible for making sure that the search process conforms to the APA Statement on Nondiscrimination and follows best practices to encourage diversity and limit the effects of implicit bias.

A. Advertising Positions

Departments should advertise (inter)nationally for all tenure-track, multi-year, or renewable positions, whether those positions are full- or part-time. There are cases in which department chairs must make informal, local, last-minute hires in order to cover enrollment overflows and sudden illnesses for a single semester or year. But, in general, informal, last-minute hiring is to be avoided. A broad geographic search enhances fairness and makes it possible for the hiring department to locate the best candidate for the position.

Job advertisements should list all of the key criteria that will be used by the search committee and the department in evaluating applications. For instance, the advertisement should specify whether the department has a preference for candidates from a particular philosophical tradition or approach. (See the APA’s Statement on Clarification of Qualifications.) Information for preparing a job advertisement is available at PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers. While the APA does not favor increasing the pressure on graduate students to publish, those research institutions that prefer candidates with publications should make this clear in their ads. It would also be useful for applicants to know whether hiring departments plan to conduct a first round of interviews and by what means (electronic vs. in-person).

Note that when advertising in PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers, ads must indicate whether the hiring process will conform to the APA’s Statement on the Job Market Calendar; if it will not, an explanation for the departure from the standard calendar must be provided. We strongly recommend that searches comply with the Statement on the Job Market Calendar.
Hiring departments should recognize that the amount of material that they request from applicants places a burden on candidates that disproportionately affects members of marginalized and precariously employed groups. It is good practice for departments to request fewer documents in the application file for initial decisions, and to request documents that are common across hiring departments, such as CV, teaching evaluations, a writing sample, and letters of recommendation. Departments should be aware that some document handling services charge a fee to candidates unless the hiring department purchases a subscription. Having to pay document service fees may create a financial barrier to fresh PhD graduates and members of precariously employed groups for whom the cost of using the service may create a financial hardship. The choice to use a document handling service that is free for applicants may widen the pool of applicants.

The best practice is for all full-time positions, including adjunct positions, to be advertised in PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers. The fact that many institutions do not advertise in PhilJobs: Jobs for Philosophers when hiring adjunct instructors prevents qualified candidates from learning about positions that are of interest to them, and philosophy programs from identifying the best quality candidates for their job openings.

B. Assessing Applications
Departments are likely to receive a great many applications—too many to read the writing samples of every applicant. Some method of making a preliminary cut is often necessary. However, even when there are a great many applications, there is always enough time to thoughtfully consider how to make a preliminary cut. If the files are divided among the members of the search committee, the method of making preliminary cuts should be consistent across members. Each file should be read by at least two committee members and the criteria for elimination should be clear and carefully applied.

Throughout the assessment of the files of applicants, it is important to be mindful of implicit biases (see the section on “Countering Implicit Bias” in the APA’s Good Practices Guide). The science on reducing implicit bias is young and the context of assessing applications in philosophy has not been studied. The following suggestions must be tentative. It may be that certain mental states (e.g., anger, fatigue, stress) can increase implicit biases. Search committees should seek to review files under conditions in which such mental states are reduced or absent. Concrete criteria discussed in advance may help to mitigate implicit bias. In addition, reminding search committee members to work to fight implicit bias may be effective. The diversity officer, if there is one on the search committee, should be responsible for addressing the need to counter implicit biases.

Hiring departments might hold a discussion regarding the possibility of bias in favor of certain degree-granting institutions over others. Qualified candidates can come from both traditional and nontraditional corners of academia. In considering student course evaluations as evidence of teaching excellence, members of the search committee should keep in mind that there is some research suggesting that students may not fairly evaluate teachers of all genders and ethnicities.

If departments conduct a partially anonymous search, the ad for these searches should clearly request that candidates remove their names and any race- and gender-identifying information from their CVs and writing samples. An administrative assistant might review all the applications to make sure they are properly anonymized. Only the anonymized CVs and writing samples are available to the group doing the preliminary review. Once this group settles on a reduced list, the administrative assistant adds the letters of recommendation to the files. Departments may be precluded from conducting partially anonymous
searches when using electronic software for the submission of candidate materials if the software does not permit files to be handled in the appropriate way.

As the search proceeds, departments should promptly inform candidates who are no longer under consideration. If some candidates are eliminated, some are moved to the next stage in the search, and some are held on a backup list, the candidates on the backup list should promptly be informed of their status. Information from candidates who were eliminated is likely to become public. If candidates on the backup list receive no information, they are likely to be concerned that there has been a clerical error. Once the department has made an offer and the offer has been accepted, all candidates should be informed that the search is over.

C. Interviews

Conducting first-round interviews at APA meetings has become a rarity in recent years. Most departments opt to use internet-based technology (Skype or similar software) to conduct first-round interviews. (See the Guidelines for Interviews via Internet Meeting Software and Telephone, Appendix A of APA's Best Practices for Interviewing.) Such interviews pose less of a financial burden to the candidate. There is also some concern regarding poor treatment of candidates, particularly female candidates, in interviews at convention venues.

After the first-round interviews, hiring departments will select a smaller “short list” of candidates to receive a second round of interviews on campus. For teaching-focused positions, there is often only one round of either internet interviews or interviews on campus.

Some departments opt to eliminate first-round interviews. Many researchers have expressed skepticism regarding the usefulness of unstructured interviews in hiring, as well as concerns regarding bias impacts, and this has led some departments to skip the standard first stage and invite candidates directly to the campus interview. (See Research on Interviewing, Appendix B of APA's Best Practices for Interviewing.)

i. First-Round Interviews

Members of the hiring committee should be well prepared for the interviews. Each member of the department's hiring committee should have a packet on each candidate containing the same information. This information may include, among other things, the candidate’s CV, writing sample, and perhaps a sheet listing highlights from the candidate’s dossier.

How much time a department schedules for interviews will depend upon various considerations, particularly how many candidates the department has decided to interview. In fairness to the candidates being interviewed, departments should be as sensitive as possible to limit the number of interviews to what can reasonably be accomplished.

Most departments schedule 30 to 60 minutes per interview. Departments should allow enough time between interviews to both briefly discuss the interview once the candidate has left and to prepare for the next candidate. There should also be time allocated for the interviewee to ask questions.

Members of the hiring committee should confine themselves to asking only questions that are pertinent to the candidate’s qualifications for the job. Indeed, it may be a good idea for the hiring committee to specifically discuss what sorts of questions they will ask ahead of time. Candidates should be asked the same kinds of questions in the same order. The basic idea is that structured interviews are crucial for
avoiding unintended bias. Interviewers should make certain that they are not giving some candidates opportunities denied to others—for example, giving some candidates a chance to talk about their research while denying that chance to others. Structured interviews do not require that all the questions are identical, since in the normal interview there will certainly be questions that need to be tailored to the specifics of a candidate’s research interests, past teaching experience, and so forth. Structuring the interview to the extent that is reasonable has the advantage of making the interview experience for the candidates as fair and consistent as possible, and also helps preclude the possibility that inappropriate questions will be asked. Members of the hiring committee must not ask illegal questions and should familiarize themselves with what is legal/illegal to ask a candidate, consulting with their university legal officers if in doubt. Hiring committees should be familiar with institutional guidelines as well.

Individual departments will have their own objectives in mind in conducting an interview. Some may focus more on research, others more on teaching. One example of how to conduct an interview is the following: (1) the interviewing department opens the interview with a description of how the interview will proceed; (2) someone on the committee summarizes the candidate’s writing sample and asks an opening question about the candidate’s research, then opens the interview up for discussion of research; (3) a committee member then asks how the candidate will contribute to the teaching needs of the department, as indicated in the advertisement for the job; (4) a committee member then asks if the candidate has any questions about the job; and (5) the candidate is given information about a contact person who is available for follow-up questions, and who will be in contact with the candidate about the job.

Because interviews at APA meetings have become so rare, the APA no longer provides a placement service or an interview room at divisional meetings. Hiring departments that have decided to conduct interviews at professional meetings will need to make their own scheduling arrangements with candidates and arrange for either a suite or conference room in which to conduct interviews.

A hiring department conducting interviews at a professional meeting should make sure, in scheduling interviews with candidates, that enough time is provided for candidates to arrange for transportation and lodging. Accommodation must be provided for disabilities, and departments must ensure that all elements of the interview process at the venue are accessible. The interviews themselves must not be conducted in a hotel room used for sleeping. (See the APA Statement on Hotel Room Interviews.) Departments should be aware that many hotels label certain rooms as “suites” (e.g., “Executive Suite,” “Junior Suite”) when they are not suites but merely larger rooms. The key point is that a bed should not be visible. Departments should make inquiries about this point when reserving a suite. If no suite is available in the conference hotel, acceptable alternatives include a suite at a nearby hotel or a conference room. If the interview takes place in a hotel suite, it should be orderly. Interviewees should be offered water and be seated in a chair (not, e.g., on a coffee table).

Throughout the initial interview process, members of the hiring committee are to maintain the highest standards of professionalism and refrain from behavior that may distract or intimidate the candidate.

Interviewers should not conduct post- or pre-interview “interviews” at APA receptions. Best practices for mitigating bias in interviewing include treating interviewees alike, as much as possible, and informal interviews by their nature introduce disparities among applicants. Furthermore, the physical environment of the receptions can create barriers for members of the community with disabilities—not everyone can negotiate the ballroom with the same ease, or hear each other speak over the noise, etc.
ii. The Campus Visit

After the first-round interviews, the department hiring committee conducting a search generally decides to invite a short list of candidates to campus for visits to continue the interviewing process. For teaching-focused positions, departments may move directly to on-campus interviews or conduct only internet interviews. Candidates should be given a choice of alternative dates to make the visit. Each candidate should receive information about arrangements for transportation and lodging. A detailed itinerary should be provided to the candidate. The travel portion of the itinerary should be arranged as much in advance as possible, and the on-campus itinerary should be provided to the candidate at least two days in advance of the visit. The itinerary should include contact information for the candidate’s contact person on campus. Breaks should be included in the itinerary to allow the candidate to have ample time to meet personal needs and prepare for each stage of the interview.

The interviewing department should ensure that all stages of the interview process are accessible. Reasonable accommodation for disabilities may include making sure that all interview-related activities take place in accessible locations for candidates with mobility impairments, providing large-print materials and/or recordings of printed materials for candidates with vision impairments, and offering special menus to candidates with food allergies.

The hiring institution should pay the travel expenses of a candidate invited to its campus for an interview. These expenses include airfare, ground transportation, lodging, and meals. Ideally, the department should try to arrange the purchase of tickets and accommodation ahead of time so that the candidate will not have to incur, even temporarily, the costs of the travel. Recent graduates and those who are precariously employed are generally short of funds for campus visits, and an institution that desires such visits before making an offer is better positioned to cover expenses. Hiring departments that are unable to pay any portion of travel expenses ahead of time should make it clear in advance how reimbursements will be handled, and then reimburse promptly after the visit.

Some departments require candidates to pay their own on-campus interview expenses. The APA strongly discourages this practice, although it may be the only practice available to institutions with limited funds. Institutions that cannot pay full expenses for candidates should consider paying partial expenses and be clear with candidates about what expenses they can and cannot pay. Departments in this situation should give candidates as much information as possible about the interview process so that they can determine whether participating in this stage of the interview process is worth their time, effort, and cost. For example, they should be told how many candidates are being invited to interview if they pay their own expenses.

It is a good idea to provide a packet of materials containing information about the department and university to the candidates. Include pertinent information that may not be readily available on the department and university website, and information that interested candidates may feel uncomfortable asking about in the interview setting, such as formal policies of the department, college, or university about tenure procedures at the university, dual-career hiring policies, and historical tenure data. These may be taken from the faculty handbook or other sources.

Any person hosting an event, such as meals as part of the interview process, should maintain a professional relationship with the candidate. Job candidates are apt to agree to requests from the event host, so the event host should make only requests that are considerate of the candidate’s interests. For example, it would be inappropriate to suggest impromptu late night activities when the candidate has early morning
commitments. If the event host knows someone in the department is likely to behave inappropriately, the event host should take steps to minimize harm, for example, by warning the candidate and by not allowing the candidate to be alone with that person.

Hiring institutions should not request information that encourages discrimination, even unintentional discrimination. The information the search committee gathers is primarily, but not exclusively, about the candidate's qualifications. Hiring institutions have a legitimate interest in a candidate's likelihood of accepting an offer if made and likelihood of staying at the institution. For example, information about a candidate's geographical preferences is not relevant to a candidate's philosophical qualifications but is relevant to the likelihood of the candidate accepting an offer.

For positions that are not teaching-focused, two of the central features of most on-campus interviews are a teaching demonstration and a research presentation. For teaching-focused positions, there is usually no research presentation. In addition, meetings with administrators such as the college dean are usually required of candidates during the interview process. All tasks required during the interview process should be specified in the itinerary given in advance of the visit.

On-campus interviews may involve a teaching demonstration. At least a week ahead of the demonstration, candidates should be informed about the context in which they will be required to teach. If they will be teaching a session of a course, candidates should be informed about the level of the course and the length of the class period, and provided with the syllabus, the day's reading, and the opportunity to ask a few questions of the instructor. If the hiring department plans to solicit student feedback on the teaching demonstration, candidates should be informed of this as well. If candidates will be teaching a mock class or giving a sample course lecture to faculty members, the candidate should be provided with guidelines indicating the preferred level, size, character, and philosophical subfield of the imagined class. Finally, hiring departments should inform candidates about the available classroom technology. During the teaching demonstration, someone from the hiring institution should be available to provide tech support for the candidate.

If a research presentation is required, candidates should be told of expectations regarding length and formality. They should also be informed about the audience (students, graduate students, philosophy faculty, other faculty, etc.) as well as whether there will be a question-and-answer period. Again, technical support should be provided as necessary.

Departments must take great care to ensure that each candidate for a position is treated in approximately the same manner and with the same opportunities to meet appropriate faculty. To that end, faculty members who meet with one candidate should make every reasonable effort to meet with every other candidate as well, in order to form an informed comparative judgment.

Further, departments should take care to treat candidates alike in one-to-one communications, either as part of the campus visit or afterwards.

The candidate should be informed about whom to contact (for instance, the chair of the search committee or the chair of the department) if they have further questions to ask. The candidate should also be given information regarding a contact person who will continue to provide updates about the status of the search.
Care should continue to be taken by the department to make sure that unstructured processes do not infect the structured interview process. The information-gathering processes used to make a hiring decision should be consistent across candidates. The host institution should have prepared in advance a method of evaluating the candidates invited to campus. It should solicit feedback from faculty and students who met the candidates and should gather comparable information from all candidates so that it can evaluate them all using the same criteria.

All official contact with the candidates should be handled by the same person throughout. It is understood that candidates may contact individual faculty members beyond the contact person in order to follow up on research suggestions or to ask questions that that faculty member may be best suited to answer. Faculty members are discouraged from initiating post-interview contact or sharing information that might bias the selection process. Information garnered during these post-interview conversations ought to be considered private and not part of the official hiring process.

D. Offers

All offers must be in conformity with the APA’s Statement on Offers of Employment.

Candidates and hiring institutions alike seek a good match but have some divergent interests. The candidate’s position, especially if the candidate is unemployed or a new PhD, is likely to be weaker than the hiring institution’s position, and fairness requires that the hiring institution not exploit the candidate’s weaker position.

The circumstances under which offers are made are so varied that no rule will cover all cases, but norms of professional courtesy suggest some helpful advice. Employer and prospective employee should be respectful of one another’s legitimate concerns. Employers are properly concerned about planning for the contingency of making another offer in a timely fashion if one is turned down. Prospective employees are properly concerned to make important career decisions in the light of fairly complete information about which offers they are actually going to receive. In some cases, such concerns may set employer and prospective employee at cross-purposes unless both parties exercise professional courtesy. Ideally, at the time that an offer is made, employer and prospective employee should discuss their concerns with the aim of arriving at a mutually agreeable deadline for response.

Candidates should be informed when a recommendation to hire is made by a department to the administrative officer authorized to extend offers. In normal circumstances, a prospective employee should have at least two weeks for consideration of a written offer from this administrative officer, and responses to offers of a position whose duties begin in the succeeding fall should not be required before February 1. If the candidate has had an unofficial offer that is simply confirmed by the formal written offer, and if there has been a considerable length of time for the candidate to consider the unofficial offer, it may be reasonable for the institution to expect a more rapid decision from the candidate if other candidates are waiting to hear. When an employer is unable to honor these conditions, the prospective employee should be given an explanation of the special circumstances that warrant insistence on an earlier decision. By the same token, a prospective employee should not delay unnecessarily in responding to an offer once it has been made. When a prospective employee requests more time to consider an offer than the employer is inclined to give, a candid statement of the reasons for the request is in order.

In some cases, negotiations after receipt of an offer are possible. A candidate may, for example, request modifying an offer’s provisions concerning salary and benefits, reimbursement of moving expenses,
provision of computer and peripherals, teaching duties, course release time, research assistants, clerical or administrative support, and office space. The hiring department should tell the candidate in advance what items are negotiable. At some institutions, offers are nonnegotiable. If that is the case, candidates should be informed of this in advance.

Given the availability of email as an official means of communication, oral offers and acceptances are inappropriate. Informal communication that an offer or acceptance will be forthcoming may be reasonable, but should not be relied upon by either party. At least two distinct types of situation cause difficulties with oral offers and acceptances.

One is the case in which a prospective employee receives what appears to be an oral job offer and on that account forgoes other opportunities only to learn later that the prospective employer has no job to offer because, for instance, a position does not receive final administrative approval. In order to prevent misunderstandings on this score, the prospective employer should make it very clear to the prospective employee whether a formal offer is being extended or not. If a prospective employer is only in a position to say that a formal offer will be forthcoming provided a departmental recommendation received administrative approval, and to predict such approval, the prospective employee should be told explicitly that this is the situation.

Another kind of difficulty arises when a formal offer is orally made and accepted and the prospective employee later receives and accepts another offer. Such cases can present both legal and moral problems. It is worth bearing in mind, however, that there are circumstances in which oral contracts are legally binding (this is a matter of state law and will vary). In addition, oral acceptance of a formal offer, like making a serious promise, generates a strong *prima facie* obligation to take the job thus accepted, and weighty reasons are needed to justify not doing so.