Cluster Hiring

A few years ago, during the brief window when there was money, a few colleges engaged in 'cluster hiring.' As I've heard the term used, it refers to allocating new faculty positions in clumps, rather than spreading them evenly around. Giving three lines at the same time to sociology, while telling psychology to hold its horses, would be an example.

I've never tried it myself -- those moments of actual money have been remarkably few and far between in my experience -- but I'll admit being fascinated by the concept. As near as I can figure, the arguments for cluster hiring are several:

First, it's much likelier to effect real cultural change in a department that needs it. Bringing one new hire into a department every few years is much less likely to shift the culture than bringing on several in one shot. In my estimation, this is, by far, the best argument in its favor. Some departments grow stale over time, especially if they've shrunk by attrition over the years. In those contexts, it's possible for the 'new kid' to be the one who has only been there ten years. (I've actually seen this.) When a department gets too backwards-looking, bringing in a single new person is unlikely to matter much. Bringing in a clearly-defined new cohort, though, can actually shake things up. That can work both
ways, of course, but if the status quo is bad enough, it can be a risk worth taking.

Second, and somewhat related, affirmative action is much easier to practice when you have multiple hires at once. Instead of those awful, no-win battles between "the one they really want" and "the diversity hire," you can get both. (I'll grant without argument that these are sometimes the same person. But sometimes they aren't.) I'm not saying that's right or wrong; I'm just saying that pragmatically, it makes successful compromise far easier.

Third, it gives the new kid/s allies. Having a cohort can lessen the sense of isolation or freakishness. This can be especially important when the department has a habit of sloughing off the most time-consuming service work on the junior members.

All of those granted, though, I'm still a bit skeptical.

First, there's the basic fact of economic cycles. If you were reasonably confident that you could hire a few clusters every year, then "taking turns" can make sense. But if you only get a meaningful number of hires once every five or ten years, blowing them all on one or two departments pretty much guarantees starving out everybody else. I've been through enough downturns now to know that counting on multiple, consecutive bounteous years is a fool's errand. The next time we're actually able to hire in meaningful numbers, the backlog of departments needing people is so long that bestowing the lion's share on any one (or two) would constitute something between favoritism and insanity.

Second, the pig-in-a-python model leads to predictable and difficult issues down the line. Many of the staffing issues facing higher ed now stem from an unintentional pig-in-a-python hiring pattern, in which the huge group hired in the 60's slowly makes its way to the end. Replicating that model on a micro level now will replicate those issues on a micro level later. In my observation, the most successful departments tend to have a range of career stages in them at the same time, so the experienced folks can mentor the newbies, and the newbies can keep the veterans from getting too complacent (or bitter). Too much sameness isn't good.

Third, there's quality. In some disciplines, it may be easy enough to get one or two good hires in a given year, but more than that involves some stretching. (The evergreens are mostly immune to this, but it holds true in some specialized areas.) If
new 'lines' are distributed across the curriculum, you can be pretty confident that the batting average will be high. Clustered in one spot, that isn't as true.

Admittedly, right now, cluster hiring is pretty much theoretical. (Hiring at all is pretty much theoretical.) But in a sense, that makes this a good time to think about it, since we can look at its merits without getting bogged down in local circumstances. In discussing it now, I'm not implicitly passing judgment on any one department.

Wise and worldly readers, have you lived through rounds of cluster hiring? If you have, are there pluses/minuses I've neglected? I'd like to get some clarity on this before it becomes relevant, so if/when it does, I'll be ready.

Comments:

We did this once in a social science dept at a regional university. We were excited about bringing in 5 new faculty across 2 disciplines.

It was a nightmare, for a multitude of reasons:

1. We did not have a good mentoring system set up.
2. Because the move to a new building was delayed, they were all stuffed together in what used to be the departmental library for their offices.
3. This set up a strong solidarity between them, but it quickly became "them" and "us."

Ten years later and some of that is still evident when things get bad.

So if you do this -- please think through the mentoring, spacing, and integration issues VERY carefully and please, don't let things fester if anyone or any "side" feels like the wheels of the bus are coming off. Trust me -- it takes more energy to heal than to fix the problems initially.
My colleagues were great and did bring new energy and vision -- but it was exhausting all around. We could/should have done it better. So too -- they could have trusted us a bit more that this was not some master plan to screw up their new lives too -- know?

# posted by 🚒 Anonymous : 5:43 AM

My grad program did this when I was an advanced grad student. Not being faculty in the department, I can't say for sure how it turned out, but I don't think it was a disaster. Partly, it was a completely open search, so the result was something like 3 asst profs and 2 full, so it wasn't so much a clump of us v. them, nor did it create such a bottleneck. But also, this was a dept of ~60 faculty, so it was definitely an injection of the new, but not enough to completely overwhelm the department.

I don't know that this was the case in my grad program, but it seems to be cluster hiring wouldn't have to starve other departments - it could also be a remedy to having been starved in the past.

The biggest problem was that this was, as I said, an open search. The dept got ~1200 applications and being on the search committee was a nightmare. Obviously, this isn't a necessary component of cluster hiring, but I wonder if the more people you can hire, the harder it is to decide on what fields you should look for?

# posted by 🚒 New Kid on the Hallway : 6:04 AM

I'm at a relatively young university (endowed in 1968) so having a couple of rounds of cluster hiring in my department has been a great way to balance The First Great Cluster Hire of 1968. One year my department hired 3 new faculty, all women, all now top in their fields partly because they were able to form a supportive cohort and find mentors.
Now that all of those '68 hires are rapidly retiring we should be having a Second Great Cluster Hire but with the economy the way it is I'm not sure the money will be there.

# posted by Anonymous : 6:35 AM

Last year we hired 4 new tenure-track faculty in a department that had 7 full-time faculty. Although it was indeed a 'cluster' hire, that was not the intent. Instead, it was a confluence of events that caused all 4 to be hired in one year (1 new position, 1 retirement, 2 deferred positions from the previous years when there were financial exigencies).

It has been a wild ride, between the hiring process, the tenure process, orientation/acclimatization, etc. We deliberately sought out, 'game changers' to add to an overly-staid department, and we succeeded, but the old adage, "be careful what you wish for", is now coming to mind.

We had a strong mentoring program, that seems to have succeeded, except that some of the old-timers view the mentoring process as an indoctrination camp on how to overthrow the old guard. Our new faculty are all struggling (some more, some less) with their roles and their desire to be innovative and revolutionary; in the face of some resistance. And, to be sure, at least two of them have definitely reached too far, both in terms of classroom innovation and burning bridges with colleagues.

So, I would echo much of what DD stated. In the long run, I think it will be worth it. In the short run, it is rough sledding.

# posted by AI : 8:49 AM

Since I'm applying for jobs now, I can't speak to their long term effects, but there are at least two other meanings of "cluster hire" in contexts where
I have put in applications. In one case, a university may be forming/increasing a center of some kind. That center my be topical (malaria studies) or perhaps methodological (biostatistical approaches). The new cluster of hires may be 100% based in the center, or they may have joint appointments in 1 or more disciplinary departments. In the other case, money has appeared at a higher level for hires based on a certain topic, and departments have "bid" to get money for a position. So a given department may end up hiring more than 1 person with this money, but the cluster is really based at a level higher than a department.

There may be other kinds of cluster hires too, but I haven't applied for them (yet).

Roughly 15 of the 38 full-time faculty in our department (including me) have come on in the last three years -- some replacements, some new positions. The department is terrific (and I'm not just saying that, they really are), and we've all been very welcomed.

Space has been an issue, as has mentoring. Other challenging issues in terms of time: scheduling teaching observations each semester, and completing the reappointment process in a timely manner each spring.

It hasn't helped that about halfway through the hiring, the college system changed tenure from a 5-year process to a 7-year process. Some of us are one, some the other (I'm 7).

Fairly coincidentally, I came into my department with two other new hires. I think it was good for all of us and the dept, although it has helped that we did not all wind up on the same tenure schedule, as the dossiers might have been a bit of
an admin strain.

My university seems to be doing thematic cluster hires, rather than disciplinary---eg, right now philosophy, spanish, and geography are all hiring in Latin American fields. That evens out the distribution quite a bit, as well as strengthening interdisciplinary programs, and still provides people with a potentially sympatico cohort.

posted by dance : 8:41 PM

A department in a college near me is hiring 4 tt positions for this year. The cause? They offered buy-outs to old-timers to save money. I wonder what this says about the culture of that college, but at this point I don't care. I'd be happy to have one of those positions in order to escape the awful industry job where I ended up. The economy means I can't sell my house, so I can't move, so I can't follow postdocs or other jobs. I got my 'science' PhD in April.

posted by dolphinbuddy : 3:44 PM

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