"Cluster hiring," or hiring multiple faculty into interdisciplinary research areas, is becoming an increasingly popular method for changing the dynamics of an institution. North Carolina State University, University of Connecticut, Georgia State University, University of Iowa, University of North Texas and other institutions have cluster hiring initiatives under way.

Initially, institutions may be lured to new interdisciplinary initiatives by the promise of federal research dollars, but there are often other, equally important motivators. Students are demanding academic programs focused on real-world issues. Employers are asking for graduates who can work in teams across disciplinary specialties. And, despite budget cuts, governmental agencies, nonprofits, and businesses are looking to higher education to help them solve the "big problems," such as global climate change, food security, health care, political instability, and new-age literacy. Cluster hiring would seem to move us forward into this new, more urgently collaborative world.

But many institutions are surprised to find that cluster hiring is much more difficult than they anticipated. Too often universities plunge headlong without thinking through the commitment to change that such hiring entails. Faculty, department heads and deans can resent being asked to share resources that they expect to own, and, even for the most receptive of institutions, there are the constant challenges of remaking administrative structures that were intended for disciplinary, not interdisciplinary, hiring.

Fortunately, best practices are starting to emerge from those universities with the longest track records on interdisciplinary hiring. Some of these universities, such as University of Wisconsin and University of Michigan, have had large cluster initiatives focused on hiring 100 or more faculty members. Others, such as the University of California at Berkeley and Duke University, have used cluster hiring as only a small part of their overall strategy for advancing interdisciplinarity. From their shared experiences, it is now possible to define a cluster hiring process that others can adapt and refine, as we have done at North Carolina State University. We have currently hired 24 faculty members in 12 clusters and are searching for another 19 faculty members this year. (See cluster descriptions and faculty photos and bios here. [1])

Here are the key things to remember:

**Start With a Long-Term Plan**

For all the universities named above, cluster hiring was part of a larger vision of academic transformation that developed over many years. At University of Wisconsin, cluster hiring was the result of an innovative university and state partnership, begun in 1998. University of
Michigan’s cluster hiring program, begun in 2007, started with a 2005 initiative based on a $2.5 million investment in "growing the faculty." At Berkeley, the New Interdisciplinary Initiatives, begun in 2003, developed out of a 2002 strategic plan. At Duke, cluster hiring is only one small piece in a 20-year plan for building interdisciplinary excellence, now focused on seven interdisciplinary institutes, which grew out of its 2006 strategic plan, "Making a Difference." Interdisciplinary advancement requires commitment to the creation of a model that best fits the institution.

Establish Interdisciplinary Oversight

Cluster hiring is a messy process, and it doesn’t succeed unless administrators at the highest levels are willing to intervene to make it work. At all of the universities mentioned above, specific administrators are charged with the advancement of interdisciplinary initiatives. Though position titles vary greatly across these institutions, often there is a division of labor that involves a champion and a detail person. The champion works to advance interdisciplinarity through persuasion and negotiation. The detail person makes sure the bureaucracy changes in ways that enable interdisciplinary work to function.

Rethink Basic Processes and Procedures

While a university’s detail person is indispensable, he or she cannot remake a university’s processes and procedures alone. Faculty members and other administrators must be equally committed. Ideally, a cluster faculty member will have allegiances to both his or her research cluster and his or her department(s). Without hiring processes that involve both clusters and departments, and tenure and promotion processes that account for interdisciplinarity, clusters may not succeed, and cluster faculty may leave for other universities. The University of Wisconsin, whose cluster hiring initiative is the oldest in the nation at a large university, has some of the best processes for hiring cluster faculty posted on its website. Tenure and promotion rules also need to be rethought.

At NC State, we have revised our tenure and promotion rules to allow for greater flexibility in reviewing interdisciplinary faculty, including an option for review by an interdisciplinary committee rather than the entire departmental voting faculty.

Develop an Interdisciplinary Infrastructure

Universities need to anticipate the differences in how interdisciplinary work is done. One of the most crucial concerns is space, since cluster hire faculty need collaborative work spaces.

Berkeley, for example, has built a number of new buildings designed with a higher ratio of collaborative to individual space. Duke has developed an umbrella structure of interdisciplinary institutes, each with its own, unique space. Space has been our most challenging issue at NC State, and it has resulted in a more centralized — and more strategic — approach to allocating, or reallocating, space.

Pay Attention to Diversity Issues

Maintaining a commitment to diversity while cluster hiring can be particularly challenging. Pools are often small. Research faculty, because of the innovative nature of their programs, can be difficult to compare and evaluate. At NC State, we have stressed the importance of diversity to our search committees through three, separate diversity presentations, a process
that developed from our 2008-2012 National Science Foundation ADVANCE grant. But locating diverse candidates is only a first step.

Faculty from underrepresented groups may be hesitant to accept positions where the path to tenure and promotion appears riskier. In order to combat these problems, administrators need to be prepared to tell incoming candidates how they will be mentored, evaluated and supported. Michigan, for example, requires mentoring plans for its incoming cluster hires, all of whom are junior faculty. At NC State, all of our cluster faculty will have plans specifying how they are to be evaluated annually and for promotion and tenure. See format posted here. [4]

Create a Home for Interdisciplinary Faculty

Some universities have a tendency to think of cluster hire faculty as the missing pieces in their research puzzle, only to be surprised that these "puzzle pieces" are human beings who require interaction and community. Cluster hire faculty members need to be welcomed and engaged by their clusters, their home department(s), and the university as a whole. At NC State, we are developing a yearlong program in collaboration with the libraries, the office of research, and the provost’s office for introducing our cluster hire faculty to the university.

Commit to Ongoing Assessment

The best universities are committed to ongoing reflection on what has worked and what has not. The University of Wisconsin has re-evaluated its cluster hiring program on a five-year cycle (2003 and 2008), and then again in 2010, continually refining processes as time goes on. Each time UW officials have reaffirmed the positive benefits of cluster hiring, while at the same time working to improve interdisciplinary functionality on their campus. They also post their reports [5] on their website, for the benefit of the entire higher education community.

Cluster hiring is not for those universities that want short-term wins. It requires rethinking and revisiting the most basic processes of academia, from the hiring and promotion of faculty to the planning of facilities. More effort and more sharing of solutions is still needed, but many of us are beginning to get a glimpse of the “new college” that Virginia Woolf envisioned in Three Guineas, some 75 years ago, where the aim is not "to segregate and specialize, but to combine."

Author Bio:

Laura Severin is professor of English and special assistant to the provost for academic planning at NC State. She was a 2011-12 American Council on Education Fellow, hosted by Duke University. She gives presentations and serves as a consultant on cluster hiring.

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