The Promise and Peril of Cluster Hiring

Recruiting multiple scholars can bolster interdisciplinary work. But be sure to consult faculty members each step of the way.

By Beth McMurtrie | MARCH 13, 2016

In 2014, the University of California at Riverside announced a hiring initiative to add 300 faculty members to its ranks. As part of that ambitious effort, it planned to hire groups of people to work on interdisciplinary research, raise the university’s profile, and improve the diversity of the faculty.

Riverside’s professors were excited. The university had long toiled in the shadows of more-prestigious UC campuses and had suffered budget cuts in recent years. This hiring spree, with an emphasis on innovative work in clusters of disciplines, would help rejuvenate the campus.

But just a few months later, the process began to unravel. After 26 cluster proposals were chosen last spring from dozens submitted, professors complained that the selection process was opaque. They didn’t think the clusters aligned well with existing departmental hiring plans. And they worried that added layers of review would result in failed searches.

Last month, following the release of a faculty survey that detailed these and other problems with the cluster initiative, Chancellor Kim A. Wilcox hit the pause button. Beyond the 76 approved positions for hire this year, and another 63 approved for next year, he put new cluster hires on hold until the process could be improved.

Riverside’s experience illustrates both the promise and the peril of cluster hiring.
Riverside’s experience illustrates both the promise and the peril of cluster hiring, which has been growing in popularity across academe. Indiana University and the Universities of Illinois, Notre Dame, and Central Florida are just some of the places that have engaged in cluster hiring in recent years.

On the one hand, its appeal is clear. Recruiting groups of people from diverse disciplines to tackle global problems such as climate change or perform cutting-edge research in areas like neuroscience can gain publicity, produce important work, increase collaboration across campus, and attract new sources of money.

On the other hand, because it operates outside the traditional boundaries of hiring — departments deciding their direction — cluster hiring can add layers of red tape and confusion. Some faculty resist cluster hires because the process cedes control typically held by departments to senior administrators. Clusters can be hard to manage because new methods for evaluating service, research, and publication records must be devised. And clusters can be complicated to sustain. Researchers and administrators move on; priorities change.

Administrators at colleges that have tried cluster hiring say it helps to start slowly and from the ground up. Without faculty buy-in, as well as time to review effectiveness, cluster hiring won’t work, or at least won’t work as well as it could. It also helps, they say, to build on existing disciplinary strengths and established interdisciplinary work, rather than starting something from scratch. Without those elements, plans can quickly go awry.

Riverside’s cluster-hiring effort is the brainchild of its vice chancellor and provost, Paul J. D’Anieri, who arrived in July 2014, just a few months after Mr. Wilcox announced that the university would be hiring 300 new faculty members. It was Mr. D’Anieri’s idea to set aside a portion of those hires to build interdisciplinary teams, acknowledging the university’s strategic plan to raise Riverside’s profile, particularly in research. He also wants to increase faculty diversity on a campus where about 30 percent...
of students identify as Chicano or Latino.

To finance the new hires, Riverside is relying on a combination of rising enrollment and tuition increases, along with unallocated recurring revenue thanks to conservative budgeting during the recession, Mr. D’Anieri said.

Professors were intrigued by the cluster idea, which encourages them to think innovatively and across disciplines. "I was thrilled about it," says Timothy Lyons, a professor of biogeochemistry. "It immediately made sense to me."

Mr. Lyons was one of many faculty members who responded to the provost’s request for proposals, suggesting a cluster on planetary science and astrobiology that would build on his work with NASA and with faculty members in the fields of astronomy, physics, and earth sciences.

The first sign of trouble, he and others say, was a lack of detail from the administration. Faculty members found the proposal guidelines vague and the evaluation process unclear. Deans ranked proposals coming from their faculty members, while a separate, anonymous committee, made up of faculty members from across the campus, did its own rankings. Mr. D’Anieri reviewed those evaluations and consulted with other senior administrators to come up with the final selections, which he announced last spring.

That list didn’t make sense to everyone. Mr. Lyons’s proposal, for example, was not selected, he says, despite receiving strong evaluations. Yet other, weaker, proposals had made it to the top, he says. He was not alone in his assessment.

Mr. Lyons challenged the provost in a town-hall meeting last May. He said the provost was not getting "a full sense for the level of dissatisfaction" among faculty members concerning perceived biases by the administration, which were thought to have led to a number of the best proposals being overlooked, including some "rising stars of excellence" on campus.

Mr. D’Anieri tried to be reassuring by saying that if executed well, the clusters could make Riverside a "star nationally." But, he added, "there were, to put it bluntly, winners and losers in this process. And I have no doubt that people whose proposals weren’t supported will be upset, and I would say even should be upset. But given the resources that were at our disposal, we made the best choices we could. And I’ll stand
The Approach

As part of a plan to hire 300 additional faculty members, the University of California at Riverside decided to embark on a series of cluster hires to raise its national profile, diversify the faculty, and tackle important areas of research.

Faculty members were asked to submit proposals that were to be evaluated by their deans as well as by a campuswide faculty committee. The provost, in consultation with others, made the final selection for the first round of hires. That included 26 approved clusters. The areas of research were grouped into seven broad categories: food science, next-generation technologies, human health, environmental science, education and social policy, creative and performing arts, and innovation in business and the social sciences.

What Went Wrong

Many faculty members were upset by the process and the results. According to a survey, they found the proposal criteria vague and confusing, they didn’t have much time to put together proposals, they thought the evaluation process was opaque, and the final choices didn’t make sense to some. They feared that the cluster-hiring strategy had supplanted departmental hiring strategies. Search committees were unclear on how to move forward. The plan as a whole, some said, lacked strategic cohesion.

The Way Forward

The faculty senate has asked the administration for more consultation, limited trials, more transparency, better management, and better follow-through for new initiatives. The administration has agreed to slow down the process, and some communication issues have been resolved. But faculty members remain concerned about how cluster hiring will mesh with existing departmental hiring plans.

— Beth McMurtrie

In December the senate surveyed the faculty to get a clearer sense of the dissent. More than 300 people, or about half of the faculty, responded. Nearly 40 percent said the time provided to prepare a cluster-hiring proposal, about two months, wasn’t...
adequate. About three-quarters said the selection criteria for proposals weren’t clear and the evaluation process wasn’t transparent. Sixty-nine percent said it was not an appropriate replacement for departmental hiring.

The comments were blunt: "A good number of the faculty feel more disaffected and marginalized by the process." "Administration seems to be making this up as they go along which does not inspire confidence." A member of the faculty-evaluation committee called the results "haphazard." Another called it a "power grab by the provost."

"Please," wrote one person, "for God’s sake, take this slowly."

The faculty senate sent a series of recommendations to the administration last month. Among them: more consultation with the faculty, a "more measured launch" of new initiatives, a transparent proposal review and selection process for future cluster hires, and more support for faculty members hired into clusters once they’re on campus, including sufficient space and staffing.

Mr. D’Anieri has taken the criticism in stride, saying that while some problems could have been avoided if the university had rolled out the cluster-hiring process more slowly, "we have a pretty urgent need to move forward."

Enrollments, he says, are expanding, the campus is growing, and the faculty needs to expand along with it.

He rejects the notion that the process lacked transparency or was a power grab. "Every faculty member on campus was eligible to put in proposals," he says, noting that some junior faculty members got their proposals approved, something that would not have happened under the traditional hiring system.

Robert A. Hanneman, a longtime faculty member in the sociology department, agrees that some of the dissension may be coming from more-senior faculty members. "Here the process was taken out of the departments, and it allows younger and other faculty marginalized by the power structure to have greater input." At the same time, he says, he is skeptical of the need to use cluster hiring, which he finds faddish, to generate more creative work. "There are good, traditional mechanisms for doing it," he says. "What would probably be a lower-risk, lower-cost strategy, like creating interdisciplinary programs" on a smaller scale.

Mr. Wudka says faculty members are somewhat reassured by the administration’s decision to put a pause on cluster hires but remain concerned about where this leaves departmental hiring plans.
“Cluster hiring tried to force departments to think outside the box, and in that sense it was very successful,” he says. “But it not only forced departments to think outside the box, it pushed them outside the box and said, OK, stay here.”

Riverside’s plan is more ambitious than most, but cluster hiring is never easy. Proponents, however, say it’s worth the headaches if done carefully.

Florida State University was an early adopter of cluster hiring, unveiling its first proposal in 2006. W. Ross Ellington, associate vice president for research, said the university was looking to raise its profile through faculty hiring, but in a way that could get the most value for the money. The plan was to hire as many as 200 people over five years.

But then the recession hit, the provost retired, and the president moved on. In the end, FSU was able to create just two clusters from that first plan. Despite the roadblocks, the university has found success as clusters continue to develop under a new administration, says Mr. Ellington, in areas such as energy and materials, coastal and marine research, and brain health and disease.

Robert Mark Isaac, chair of the economics department, helped start one of the first clusters, in experimental social science, in which economists and political scientists apply methods such as game theory to designing tax policy and a variety of other social-science challenges.

Mr. Isaac says the cluster has been popular, attracting other Florida State faculty members who are not officially part of the nine-person group but are interested in the work. "It did really make FSU stand out," he says.

Still, he says, change is constant. "The idea that you are going to hire a certain set of people that will create wonderful stability and niceness is upside down," he says. "The more successful the cluster, the more it’s necessary to have a long-term strategy for people coming and going."
The University of Notre Dame laid the groundwork for clusters with a series of joint hires in the mid-2000s, says Robert J. Bernhard, vice president for research. Three years ago, it began a cluster program to hire 80 faculty members in 10 areas of research. Proposals came from faculty members, and a cross-disciplinary committee chose the winners, yet Notre Dame still experienced pushback from professors who didn’t see how clusters fit their departments’ strategic plan.

At the same time, says Mr. Bernhard, young faculty members seem to find the idea of working in groups particularly appealing. "Many in my generation were raised to be independent contributors," he says. "Our younger faculty are looking for, Where is the best group for me to join?"

Skeptics counter that proponents of cluster hiring often overlook the opportunity costs. If all your energy is going into a small set of splashy hires, what are you not working on instead?

Jerry A. Jacobs, a sociology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote a book, In Defense of Disciplines, partly to counter the idea that higher education needs strategies such as cluster hiring to do interdisciplinary work. He notes that the top 25 research universities run, on average, 100 research centers each, most of which are interdisciplinary. "People have this idea that professors are sitting there isolated in their silos, cogitating on problems and not talking to anyone. But somebody is in these research centers."

Mr. Jacobs also worries that administrators forget that strong interdisciplinary research is built on strong disciplines. In other words, don’t neglect your departments. Abbas Benmamoun agrees. Vice provost for faculty affairs and academic policies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, he says its plan to build clusters in areas such as sustainability and health and wellness will be designed around existing strengths. "Strong departments want to collaborate with strong departments, and strong faculty want to collaborate with strong faculty," he says. "I cannot emphasize this enough."

One of the biggest questions surrounding cluster hiring is: Does it work? Overall, experts say, little research has been done on whether cluster hiring brings in more research money and raises an institution’s profile. How well it tackles the world’s most pressing problems or produces innovative research has also been difficult to measure.

One report said faculty diversity, often a stated goal of cluster hiring, improved among most of the 10 institutions surveyed. A study by Erin Leahey, a sociology professor at
most of the 10 institutions surveyed. A study by Erin Leahey, a sociology professor at the University of Arizona, found that scholars who engage in interdisciplinary research publish less often but are more highly cited than average.

Perhaps the most scrutinized cluster-hiring program has been that at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Starting in 1998, the university has hired about 140 faculty members to fill nearly 50 clusters. Michael Bernard-Donals, vice provost for faculty and staff programs, says that early challenges, such as determining service loads or the best way to evaluate publication records, have largely been worked out. It helped, he says, that the campus rolled the program out over a five-year period, enabling leaders to iron out kinks along the way.

Researchers in these clusters have brought in about the same amount of money as their peers have, he says. The real impact has been to foster new academic programs, raise the caliber of the faculty, and enable people across campus to engage in interdisciplinary work. Early innovators — clusters in nanotechnology or genomics, for example — helped spark new research in fields like engineering, agriculture, and life sciences. Today about 500 of Wisconsin’s 2,000 faculty members are involved in interdisciplinary work, he says, even though only a fraction of them are part of a cluster.

But it’s not as if administrators’ work is over. "What we’re facing right now is what to do with the clusters where excitement has subsided some, or there’s less cross-disciplinary exchange, or the faculty have reverted to disciplinary research," Mr. Bernard-Donals says. Still, he adds, "if there are clusters that haven’t functioned as well as we’d like, we’re still getting a tremendous bang for the buck."

Back at Riverside, both Mr. D’Anieri and faculty members are hopeful that tensions will subside as the problems are worked out and new hires begin arriving on campus. "At some point you lick your wounds. You just take a deep breath and say, we as a
department and maybe even as a college are going to benefit from this," says Mr. Lyons, the biogeochemistry professor.

A slew of search committees are working to fill positions in areas such as genomics, next-generation technologies, neuroimaging, indigenous studies, and business analytics research. Among the first hires: Xiaoping Hu, a professor of biomedical engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology and Emory University, who will run a new neuroimaging center. "To some extent the results will speak for themselves," says Mr. D'Anieri. "If we're able to hire great people, people will look back and think of this as being a great thing."

*Correction (3/15/2016, 5:10 p.m.):* This article originally stated that all but 76 of Riverside's planned cluster hires had been put on hold. In fact, 76 positions have been approved for hire this year and 63 have been approved for next year. The text has been updated.

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