Behavior-Based Interviewing Strategies for Hiring New Faculty

By: Mary Clement, EdD.

The stakes are high when hiring a new faculty member who can teach, publish, and serve your institution. Since most vitae make the candidates sound wonderful, is there a way to ensure that the strongest candidates get hired? Long used in the business world, behavior-based interviewing (BBI) aids in the selection of new faculty who can perform their tasks.

Based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance, behavior-based interviewing calls upon candidates to tell about their previous skills, knowledge, and experiences. Savvy interviewers on the search committee ask BBI-style questions that start with “Tell me about a time when...” or “Describe how you have....”

Envision the new position
To make a behavior-based interview work, everyone involved on the search committee must be able to envision the position and must know what skills, knowledge, and experiences a successful candidate possesses. Then, questions addressing those skills should be written. Committee members should take notes and evaluate the candidates’ answers with a premade rubric. Every effort should be made to have the same structure for the overall interview schedule, and to have an identical list of questions posed to candidates at a given time.

Writing and evaluating answers
Questions about teaching, publishing, and service are determined in advance by the search committee. Examples include:

1. Describe how you teach a lesson. What do your plans include?
2. Tell us about a lesson that went well and why it went well.
3. Your teaching here will be (undergraduate, graduate, etc.). How have you motivated students at this level to excel academically?
4. Tell us about your research and publishing agenda. What has guided your success in getting writing completed and submitted?
5. How have you involved students in your research?
6. Where have you shared your research in the past (conferences, etc.)?
7. What are ways that you have served your institution in the past?
8. Tell us about any committee work you have done.

Of course, the ultimate behavior-based interview strategy is to observe the candidate teaching. Instruments for rating candidates’ answers in the structured interviews and their sample lessons should be written in advance.
Evaluating answers
The simplest rating instrument is one with three categories—unacceptable, acceptable, and target. Other evaluators prefer a numeric scale of 1 to 5 or 1 to 7. For the search committee, list all questions and then put the rating system at the side. It is then easy to see how many target answers are given or how many high scores are attained.

“PAR” and “STAR” may help you evaluate answers. PAR stands for problem, action, and result. If a candidate is asked about a concern or problem in teaching, then he or she should be able to talk about that problem, an action taken, and a result learned. Likewise, STAR represents situation, task, action, and result.

When creating a quick evaluation tool for students and observers of a candidate’s lesson, consider unacceptable, acceptable, and target, or a sliding scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is “no” and 5 is “definitely.” The categories might include the following: instructor introduced the lesson well, instructor organized the material efficiently in the body of the lesson, instructor was clear in explanations, instructor seemed enthusiastic, etc.

Key reminders:

1. The behavior-based approach helps in sorting large numbers of applicants. Make an evaluation rubric for each set of credentials received, looking specifically at a candidate’s match with the job description, experience teaching at this level, etc.
2. Keeping a list of illegal questions in front of faculty and students in open interviews will help prevent someone from asking about family, race, religion, etc.
3. Some candidates may be able to talk about teaching but still not be able to actually teach. However, a candidate who cannot describe any aspect of a lesson doesn’t know how to teach a lesson, either.

Using the behavior-based style of interviewing can help search committees have a basis for structuring interviews.

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