Hiring and Admissions Policies for University of Kentucky

Hiring

University of Kentucky seems to have already implemented, at least on paper, many of the initial hiring practices covered in this unit.

Included in UK job postings is the EEO statement: The University of Kentucky is committed to a diverse and inclusive workforce by ensuring all our students, faculty, and staff work in an environment of openness and acceptance. We strive to foster a community where people of all backgrounds, identities, and perspectives can feel secure and welcome.

UK does have a Diversity Recruitment Resource Guide for faculty positions, outlining similar steps to those covered in Leveraging Promising Practices1. However, when asked, faculty members in our pod could not recall undergoing the suggested faculty implicit bias training for search committees or intentionally reaching out to diverse colleges and organizations to diversify the applicant pool. UK does provide a list of departments at schools that are ANSI, HBSU, HIS, and NHSI, but only one such school on the list has a geoscience department (Florida International University as an HSI). Our university provides example evaluation rubrics that include criteria like “Commitment to Diversity”, however, the rubric includes vague measurements like “More than acceptable” and “Acceptable” without guidelines for defining what these should be, allowing room for bias.

Overall, UK hires more diverse applicants than the applicant pool (23.2% of hires were minority candidates whereas 20.6% of the applicants were minorities in the measured timeframe), suggesting that at least in hiring, they are committed to diversity. However, current employees who selected African American on their application hold 7.6% of all UK positions and only 3.7% of faculty positions. UK breaks positions into 13 job groups (maintenance, faculty, etc) and women were selected for hiring more than men in all 13 groups and promoted at rates higher than men in 9 groups (including faculty positions).

Women are less likely than men to leave University of Kentucky (12.9% vs 13.7%) and minority-identifying employees are 22.2% of overall departures (voluntary and involuntary). African American employees have the highest separation rate for faculty, followed by Hispanic, then

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White, then Asian faculty. Therefore, UK has a record of diverse hiring but clearly needs to be doing a better job with retention.

While UK doesn’t seem to have, or at least have publicly listed, an established new-hire mentoring program at the university, it does offer an extensive list of mentoring resources (books, podcasts, external links) and have a number of employee affinity groups and other community groups dedicated to historically-excluded people. There has been recent discussion of implementing/improving a faculty mentoring program.

**Suggestions for improving faculty hiring:**

- Make a greater effort to assemble an applicant pool and foster relationships before recruitment
- When possible, consider the grown-your-own approach (hiring doctoral students and postdocs into faculty positions).
- Greatly improve mentoring of employees within historically excluded communities so that they feel valued and don’t separate from the university at such a high rate
- Reconsider the EES (and other department) overwhelmingly White “Dude Wall of Honor”

**Undergraduate Admissions**

In the last year that UK reported application demographics (2017), 92% of minority-identifying students who submitted a completed application were admitted. In 2016 this was 79%, so an improvement. However, only 71% of minority applications submitted were complete. During the same year, non-minority students were admitted at a rate of 97% and 89% of applications from those students were complete. This incomplete application problem seems to be a barrier for minority students.

The last “normal” class before the pandemic (where it wouldn’t have affected a four-year graduation rate) would have been the class beginning in Fall 2016. After four years 51.8% of the non-minority students who started in 2016 had completed their degree. Ultimately, ~70% of students end up finishing their degree and we have seen that number increase over the past decade. This same statistic for minority students finishing after four years is 39.8%. Even after six years the rate of minority students who finish their degree is still in the 50s. If you are a minority student at University of Kentucky, you are ~23% less likely to graduate in your 4th year than non-minority students.
University of Kentucky did make test scores optional for 2021-2022, but it remains to be seen if this will be a permanent change and if they will still allow them to be used for merit-based scholarships.

Undergraduate applicants are required to pay a $50 application processing fee. This could potentially be a barrier and may be partially to blame for the incomplete application problem.

In our department, we typically get a low number of minority geoscience majors. When we do, they have about a 50% chance of making it through their first year.

Suggestions for improving undergraduate admissions and retention:
- Keep test scores optional past the 2021-2022 year (or remove entirely)
- Stop requiring the application processing fee
- Have one or two employees dedicated to following up on incomplete applications
- Implement community improvement and mentoring within EES to prevent the loss of diverse new majors

Graduate Admissions

The Earth and Environmental Sciences Department no longer requires the GRE as part of the application. However, students submit a “mini-app” to gauge faculty interest and this has a space to enter a GRE score. This should be removed from the mini-app and any submitted scores redacted.

A common issue in the geosciences is the unwritten rule of contacting a prospective advisor before applying to ensure that there is spot available/get project details. Overall, we agree that this step does have some merit (saving students money from submitting an application where there are no available positions and allowing them to make a case for themselves if maybe they don’t shine with GPA and grades alone). However, this needs to be stated explicitly on the website for students who may be getting subpar advising at their undergraduate institution.

While there is no easy way to determine if a graduate student is going to be successful, asking for specific questions to be answered/addresses in the application and Statement of Interest is a way we could help prevent bias, especially among students who may not have yet established a relationship with a faculty member.
Suggestions for improving undergraduate admissions and retention:

- Remove GRE option from our mini-app and make sure those scores are redacted if they are included.
- Add verbiage to the website about norms
- Reevaluate Statement of Interest to ask more specific questions that may be better predictors of student success
- Make sure faculty understand the potential for bias in reference letters and perform equity checks throughout the process
- Consider large international applicant pool to increase diversity – this may require figuring out new assessment techniques
- Actively recruit from more diverse undergraduate programs
- Improve stipends/financial awards, if possible
- Increase faculty diversity and foster a welcoming community by helping make connections within and outside of the department