Bigelow | Laboratory for Ocean Sciences

Bigelow URGE Pod
FINAL Session 5 Deliverable

Policies for admissions and hiring

As part of the objectives of Unlearning Racism in Geoscience (URGE; www.urgeoscience.org), a community-wide journal-reading and policy-design curriculum to help Geoscientists unlearn racism and improve accessibility, justice, equity, and inclusion in our discipline, this deliverable seeks to audit our admissions and hiring policies to identify potential changes to improve inclusivity and lower or remove barriers to our organization.

Dear co-chairs of the Personnel Committee (PC) and the Education Committee (EC),

As part of the work of the Bigelow URGE pod, this letter provides some feedback concerning Bigelow's current procedures for employment hiring and education program student admissions. The Bigelow URGE pod provides these for the PC and EC to consider in their committee's purview of these topics, respectively. Guided by the URGE Session 5 readings and interview videos, the URGE Session 5 deliverable guideline, and an example deliverable provided by URGE, the Bigelow URGE pod met on 31 March 2021 to discuss the questions listed in Appendix 1 to evaluate how our current procedures could be improved to promote accessibility, justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. This letter provides a summary of high-level recommendations that resulted from this work.

We would like to stress that we do not provide these recommendations from a place of criticism, as we know and appreciate that the current and past members of your respective committees, as well as the professional staff involved, have put much time and talent into developing guidelines for these processes. Rather, we hope that these recommendations help to save your committees time when you next review the procedures as part of your regular committee work. If there are any questions about these recommendations, I would be happy to discuss them with your committees further or provide additional information.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations.

Submitted on 13 April 2021 on behalf of the Bigelow URGE pod,
Beth Orcutt, DEI Liaison

Recommendations to the Personnel Committee Regarding Hiring Practices:

- **Observation #1: By not including a focus on defining evaluation criteria at the beginning of our hiring practices, we might be allowing implicit biases to exclude qualified candidates from diverse backgrounds**.

  - What do we mean? Our current Hiring Policies and Procedures ask hiring committees to define a job description and complete a hiring form, but there is not an equal emphasis given to also defining hiring evaluation criteria at the beginning of the search process. There is also no guidance to make hiring evaluation criteria clear in the job advertisement, to empower all applicants to create application packages with sufficient information to address these criteria.

    - Example: In the recent SRS Search, the hiring committee was one of the first in the institution to define explicit criteria (i.e. a "rubric") for evaluating all candidates. However, this was developed well after the job advertisement had been posted, and the criteria were not explicit in the advertisement. Thus, some candidates could have been disadvantaged because they did not interpret vague guidance in the advertisement to know what the hiring committee would be looking for. Moreover, although the committee developed a formal rubric, there was not agreed upon "weighting" applied to the criteria, allowing committee members to ascribe their own biases in determining importance of various criteria.

  - Why is this an issue? By not being explicit at the beginning of the search process in defining hiring evaluation criteria, hiring committees may default to decision making that does not reflect on all of the various criteria one might consider in evaluating candidates, or to apply these criteria unequally between candidates.

  - *Recommendation #1: Revise our Hiring Policies and Procedures to require that hiring committees explicitly define evaluation criteria – and with an encouragement for defining how these criteria will be "weighted" – at the beginning of the search process, to submit these criteria for evaluation by HR along with other materials before approval to begin a search, and to include these criteria and how they will be evaluated in the job advertisement.*

Recommendations to the Education Committee Regarding Student Admissions:

- **Observation #1: The short-answer questions that are part of our various student applications are not tailored to provide information to reviewers on the applicant characteristics that should be assessed to advance program goals and may instead reflect and/or be weighted towards privilege**.

  - What do we mean? In reviewing the short answer/essay questions asked of the REU, the Keller BLOOM program, and the Keller Undergraduate Scholarship applicants, we wonder if these could be improved to provide reviewers with a better sense of applicant qualities that the programs are looking to achieve in

offering student opportunities. For example, qualities reviewers are often looking for are (1) evidence of drive and determination to succeed under challenging circumstances, (2) evidence of creativity, (3) evidence that the student has shown initiative and taken advantage of the opportunities available to them, (4) evidence that the student would truly benefit from the experience offered because such opportunities would not be available to them otherwise, (5) evidence of critical thinking, and (6) evidence of leadership and/or ability to work independently. Review of the short answer questions for our programs indicates that these questions, as currently written, do not encourage the applicants to provide information to sufficiently address such categories. Moreover, in some instances, the application guidelines do not provide sufficient guidance to applicants about the criteria that reviewers will use to make decisions based on the answers given to these questions.

○ <u>Why is this an issue?</u> By not asking appropriate questions, and by not providing explicit guidance on evaluation criteria to the applicants or the reviewers, we might be disadvantaging students that have not come from privileged backgrounds, and/or favoring students whose mentors help them to read between the lines to answer implicit questions, thereby enabling implicit biases.

○ *Recommendation #1: All educational programs should review and revise the list of requested short answer/essay questions that applicants fill out to better assess student potential, and application guidance materials should include more explicit guidance on evaluation criteria.*

● **Observation #2: Our current processes for reviewing student applicants are rather haphazard and could be allowing for discrimination and implicit bias that disadvantages a variety of applicants**.

○ <u>What do we mean?</u> Focusing on the example of the REU program (because it has the largest number of student applicants), currently our process of student selection relies on individual mentors to sift through all application materials in whatever way they choose to make an initial selection, with the program director approving final choices after assessing overall balance with program goals.

○ <u>Why is this an issue?</u> Without explicit evaluation criteria and guidance to the mentors on how to assess applicants, it is likely that some mentors are not considering the full range of program-specific criteria for equally evaluating and providing opportunities for a diversity of students.

○ *Recommendation #2: Educational programs should define explicit evaluation criteria that all mentors agree to use when evaluating candidates. Moreover, we encourage consideration of instituting an admissions group that has the task of reviewing all student applicants to do an initial screening of candidates , applying the pertinent criteria, which the mentor group then selects from. This will ensure that all applicants are given equal opportunity, and that those with the best*

alignment to program goals based on defined evaluation criteria are given priority consideration. We further recommend exploring whether implementing a "lottery" selection process after initial review by the admission groups for merit/qualification could result in more equitable participation in line with program goals.

Appendix 1: Questions that guided our conversation

Suggested example questions:
- What Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) statement is included in a standard job or admissions advertisement? Are there other inclusion statements and resources publicly available?
- Where are advertisements posted or sent? Are there other strategies for reaching applicants for hiring and/or admissions?
- What are the requirements for an applicant (e.g. letters of recommendation, fees, test scores, grades)? Is providing any of these a potential barrier that could be further lowered or removed? Are there any problematic questions asked?
- How are applicants/applications evaluated? Is that process and/or rubric public? What kind of biases are introduced in this process and what strategies are used to address these (e.g. removing applicant names)?
- Who is on selection committees and who makes the final decisions? Who interacts with the applicants?
- Has your hiring and/or admissions process been evaluated by outside consultants? What is the process for changing it?
- Has your organization implemented or considered strategies like cohort hiring, mentoring, dual career support and partner hires, re-visioning your work culture, or other considerations outlined in "leveraging promising practices"?

Suggested discussion questions:
- What was your experience like going through hiring and/or admissions, start to finish?
- Who is on your hiring and/or admissions committees? Who interfaces with applicants?
- Does your organization make their hiring/admissions policies public?