On Hiring and Promotion

In the past, certain individuals by virtue, directly or indirectly, of their membership in certain racial, sexual, religious, or ethnic groups, have suffered prejudice in higher education. Places for students, and faculty slots, particularly at the major private universities, were reserved for many years largely for the affluent, or think-alikes. Decisions in too many cases were justified on the basis of non-intellectual criteria and only rarely did the truly exceptional person from a more modest background have a chance to make it to the top. It is to the great credit of individuals associated with institutions of higher learning that they have taken the lead in fighting for equal opportunity. Great progress has been made over the past decade and we can never allow ourselves to return to a bankrupt morality that allows individuals belonging to certain groups to benefit at the expense of others.

Today, affluence seems no longer to be the universally accepted mode, but one cannot help but wonder whether we have replaced it with another, equally dangerous, form of discrimination. In our headline rush to right past wrongs, to ensure equitable representation of certain (not all) groups, we may in the long run do a far greater wrong. To provide disproportionate opportunities for some in hiring and advancement, especially in view of the extremely tight job market in higher education, is necessarily unfair to others.

Moreover, such compensatory action poses a serious dilemma for all open-minded liberal thinkers. It is difficult, for example, to argue that taxes should be based on ability to pay and, at the same time, argue that special provisions should be made in salary adjustments for members of certain groups when such a policy would actually penalize those families who can least afford the current progressive loss of purchasing power. Consider, for example, the fact that this year’s 24% rise in food prices hits a family of four, four times as hard as is the case with a single worker. One can rightly argue that such considerations are irrelevant, and if one adopts a socially blind position, that is true. But can one have it both ways?

Universities can acquire and maintain excellence only if their hiring and promotion decisions are based on intellectual competence and achievement. The history of many fine institutions of higher learning, including this one, shows all too clearly the effects of basing such decisions, even partly, on irrelevant factors. Unfortunately, academia has had its share of decisions searching for a reason. Not only prejudice, subtle as it may be, but favoritism, intrigue, facade, and even connivance have too often substituted for equity, explicit criteria, competence and achievement as bases for academic achievement. Should this be hard to swallow, consider, for comparison, athletics; an area that has often been criticized by intellectuals. How many important races have been won by subterfuge? Chance may play some role, but the rules are known to all and, with rare exceptions, they are fairly administered.

What we need today, it seems to me, is a system which while sensitive to the shortcomings of the past, does not in the process “throw out the baby with the bath water.” Civil rights advocates of all persuasions are quite right in demanding that all people be judged by the same standards. Explicit criteria, equity, competence, and achievement; these are the qualities that will make a great university—not favoritism, intrigue, connivance, or facade.

Those who would argue for preferential treatment for those who happen to have been born into certain groups are just as wrong as were the “affluent” of an earlier day. Indeed, is there a fair-minded person who can think otherwise? What greater end could the University of Pennsylvania dedicate itself to than to take the lead in reestablishing creative-intellectual ability and achievement as the foundations upon which hiring and promotion decisions are made.

—Joseph M. Scandura, Associate Professor of Education