

ONE SIZE
DOES NOT FIT ALL

Soon after becoming provost, I found myself conversing with somebody who, to my surprise, exclaimed, “You don’t look like a provost!” Though I’ll admit to laughing it off, I couldn’t help but wonder what she meant. What’s a provost *supposed* to look like? For the record, I’m male, white, ruddy-complexioned, shortish, portly, curly-haired, bespectacled, and earringed (two holes, one ear). What didn’t work for her? This all got me to thinking about mismatches between *being* and *doing*.

I ask, gentle reader: What does a tenure-track professor look like? (Go ahead.) Does your response change when I specify a discipline? In physics? Nursing? Engineering? Accounting? Philosophy? Ethnic studies? (How’d that go?)

The intersection of “Who are you?” and “What do you do?” is complex, especially when responses conflict with expectations or challenge the *status quo*. I’m glad these conversations have become more frequent in higher education. We’ve been required to give more attention to knowing, understanding, and responding to the identities of students, staff, faculty, and administrators. We find ourselves questioning which people do what

work to what end and at what cost. For some, these conversations have been around for a long time — and they make one weary. For others, the conversations are new and uncomfortable, privilege having shielded them from engagement. Whether we are “familiar and weary” or “new and uncomfortable,” a theme emerges: discussions around identity politics must not be ignored.

Were there ever a context in which identity plays a critical role, conscious or not, it’s the faculty search. Each step in the process has potential for introducing bias that undermines sincere intentions to be inclusive: appointing a committee; conceptualizing the position; writing and disseminating the advertisement; recruiting; sifting through applications. At each stage, we must ask ourselves if we’ve made a decision that compromises our ability to consider a full range of qualified candidates. All too often, we get caught up in one of two frames that limit our work: either we wind up hiring somebody new to replace somebody familiar or we choose that qualified someone who best “fits in,” often code for “is most like me/us.” Neither path is likely to lead to a place in which our faculty are more diverse, never mind reflecting the student body. Nevertheless, we often fall into the trap and then lament a lack of diverse candidates. What’s to be done?

I’ve heard that when orchestras audition potential new members, candidates play behind a curtain. Those auditioning are even required to remove their shoes prior to entering the room, thereby removing potential gender bias. Sock-footed and hidden from view, candidates are judged solely on how they perform. Mindful that completely anonymizing academic hiring processes is neither feasible nor desirable, I wonder what the equivalent might be for a faculty search. Until we figure that out, we are well served to limit our assumptions about “who looks like what,” truly believing that students, staffers, professors — even provosts — come in a full range of colors, types, and sizes.

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