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How One College Reinvented Its Hiring Process to Better Test for ‘Fit’

By Audrey Williams June

Olin College of Engineering’s identity is built on being different.

There are no academic departments in the undergraduate-only college with about 350 students. Professors work under five-year renewable contracts with no opportunity to earn tenure.

But since its founding, in 1997, Olin has stuck to the norm in one key way. It has hired faculty members much like every other institution: inviting candidates to campus one by one to interview in a process that typically spanned more than a month. They would meet with faculty, give a talk about their research, and share their ideas for courses to add to the Olin catalog. But the process didn’t allow candidates to get a glimpse of how Olin really operates, leaders felt, and it didn’t always yield them as many hires as the college wanted.

So recently, Olin decided to ditch tradition. When it wanted to hire at least five or six faculty members last academic year, it turned to group interviews. According to the new design, the finalists, who hailed from different fields, would work in pairs to design and then co-teach a class — a common task for professors at Olin. The goal was to give the candidates a more authentic look at what it would be like to work in Olin’s interdisciplinary culture and to help the committee better determine if they would be a good fit.

“We really wanted to show the collaborative nature of our college,” said Sarah Spence Adams, associate dean for faculty affairs and development. “We wanted the collaboration and interdisciplinary themes to be front and center.”

Hiring future colleagues is a complex endeavor: The college is wooing the candidates, who, in turn, are trying to shine so they’ll be picked. It’s part courtship and part audition. Getting an accurate read of a candidate’s ability to perform on the job and succeed in a particular environment is tough, since curriculum vitae and face time during lunches or dinners fall short in delivering that kind of intelligence. Being as transparent as possible about the work environment and job duties can help avoid a mismatch on both sides of the hiring equation.

“Olin isn’t the best fit for everybody,” said



COURTESY OF OLIN COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING

Kelsey Houston-Edwards talks with students as part of the interview process at Olin College of Engineering.

Brian D. Storey, a professor of mechanical engineering and a search-committee member. “With this process, when they say yes, they understand what they’re saying yes to.”

Laying Groundwork

Olin’s new hiring process began last fall with a six-person search committee, led by Adams, sifting through 260 or so applications. The committee winnowed that number down to 100, all of whom did a “written interview.” Among other things, it asked applicants to describe the three Olin courses they would most like to teach and why, to write an abstract for a talk that they would give to faculty and students about their externally-facing work, and to discuss how joining the faculty there would fit with their personal and professional goals.

That exercise cut the applicant pool to about 40 people, who had video conversations with two members of the committee. Sixteen people made the short list — and that’s when the process became really atypical. In December

those finalists had another video chat, in groups of four. Even though Olin has a reputation for operating differently from other institutions, search-committee members made an effort to smooth over possible concerns and prepare the candidates for what would come next. On their video chat, candidates got to know one another and learned the details of how Olin’s unconventional on-campus interview process would play out in mid-January. They learned that they would be divided into two groups of eight and spend two days each on campus competing for slots on Olin’s faculty.

“We wanted it to feel like a conference where they were going to meet the best people in a variety of fields and collaborate with each other in ways that they wouldn’t normally get a chance to,” said Adams, a professor of mathematics and electrical and computer engineering. “But we were upfront with them that we can’t hire all of you. So technically, there’s a competition going on.”

The two-day agenda was packed: one-on-one

meetings with senior officials and lunch with students who gave up part of their winter break to serve as ambassadors and take candidates on a tour of the suburban Boston campus. Including students as a part of the process was a nod to how important it is for faculty to embrace the institution's flat hierarchy, search-committee members said.

"If you see someone putting up a wall to the students, saying, I'm a faculty member and they're the student — that's a sign," said Paul Ruvolo, an assistant professor of computer science who served on the committee. "We wanted to see if there's a spark between the faculty candidate and the student. If they come here, will they be able to attract students to their research?"

Candidates also talked about the external impact of their research for nearly a half-hour, and then answered questions about it for just as long. The Q&A portion of the talk was meant to signal to candidates that lecture-style teaching doesn't have a place at Olin, Adams said.

Course Design on the Fly

The centerpiece of the new interview process required candidates to work in pairs to brainstorm an idea for a course they could co-teach if they were hired — just like Olin faculty often do. Then they designed the course together and taught a lesson to a group of students. Two candidates proposed a course called "Optimization for Engineers," with some topics that related to their shared interest in bicycling. One is an avid cyclist who studies the sport's mechanics, while the other does research on algorithms to help bike-sharing businesses place their inventory in the right locations. Other proposed courses included "Assistive Technology for the Elderly" and "Scientific Communication for Varied Audiences."

The committee paid close attention to how candidates performed in the classroom, how they interacted with each other during prep work, and how well they engaged students. Asking candidates to co-design a course sent "a clear cultural message that this is how we interact here," said Mark Somerville, a search-committee member and a professor of electrical engineering and physics.

For job candidates, the message Olin hoped to convey — that it wasn't like other institutions — was clear before they arrived on campus. Kelsey Houston-Edwards, a mathematician, knew that most scholars in her field apply for academic positions through a particular website. Olin, however, opted to have applicants apply through its own site by sending a cover letter and CV to the search committee.

"I considered that a filter device — are you even going to do that," said Houston-Edwards, who applied to Olin while she was a Ph.D. candidate in math at Cornell University.

Houston-Edwards made the short list, and her

visit to campus played out much the way Olin officials hoped it would. She was impressed by the "huge number of people" she met, including a large share of Olin's entire faculty. And she was able to hear firsthand from students why they chose to attend the institution — a subject that had piqued her curiosity from the outset.

"One of the most amazing parts about having such an intensive experience was I really felt like I got to know the students," Houston-Edwards said. "I taught a course to students and had lunch with students. I had one student who was my buddy for the time I was there, and I got to understand what his experience was like at the school and how he related to faculty."

Houston-Edwards and another candidate designed a course together. She viewed the task as "a very literal enactment" of what it would be like for both of them if they became Olin professors. In the end, interviewing as part of a group turned out to be less harrowing than she had thought.

"We knew they weren't hiring one person," Houston-Edwards said, "so you could sit there and think of these people as your future colleagues."

Managing Freakouts

Olin's search committee worried that candidates might not be able to share Houston-Edwards' mind-set about the spirit of the process. What if they were annoyed by a group interview that left them without the feeling of being wooed? What if being face-to-face with their competition was just too much for future professors to stomach? What if the unusual process cost Olin a coveted candidate?

"A lot of it was imagining the worst-case scenario," Ruvolo said. "I thought a couple of times, if I were a candidate, I would freak out because it's so different."

A key factor in managing the Hunger Games aspect of the interviews was having enough open positions to fill — at least five or six — that aren't tied to a specific discipline, Adams said. That way, candidates aren't in direct competition with one another.

"We're hiring people, not positions, which makes it go smoother," Somerville said.

It also helped that Olin's reputation as a start-up of sorts allowed it to talk about the process in a way that would resonate with the kind of academics who wanted to work there. "At Olin we try things, and if it doesn't work that's OK. We learn from it," Somerville said.

Erhardt Graeff, a candidate who earned his Ph.D. from the Center for Civic Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was game for the experience, partly because of how he said Olin framed it — as "an experiment." Graeff, on the job market for the first time, was also looking into postdocs and jobs outside of academe. He applied to a single professorship

— at Olin. Based on reports from friends of his who enjoyed their undergraduate years there, Graeff thought Olin would be a good fit for him.

The camaraderie between the candidates in his group began early on, he said. A welcome reception helped him "break the ice with people who were in the same situation as me." A highlight for Graeff was having the opportunity to "reflect on the experience with other people as it was happening," he said, and meeting one-on-one with top administrators.

"That helped me make my decision," Graeff said.

Landing Candidates

Olin's new hiring process, despite the amount of planning it took, had a definite upside for the institution: It compressed the amount of time the campus community spent interacting with job candidates. For a college with a small faculty that is intimately involved in hiring its peers, "it's a massive win to invest the time and energy upfront and then be done," said John B. Geddes, a professor of applied mathematics who was on the search committee. "We're so happy with that aspect of it."

Olin's new hiring strategy had another perk: It gave Olin a better chance to hire the faculty members it really wanted. When the college tried a few years ago to make a half-dozen hires using the traditional serial-interviewing process, the effort fell flat. Some applicants accepted other offers while Olin was still in interview mode.

"We only hired one person that year, despite wanting to hire six to eight," Geddes said. "We just could not land them."

With the new process, group interviews took place over four days. Olin began ranking candidates from the first group in the hours before the second group was set to arrive. The committee made offers two days after the last group of candidates left campus, Adams said.

Olin's new interviewing process won't work every time it goes about hiring new faculty. The number of new hires would be a key factor. If there are too few faculty slots to fill, it will be much harder for a group of candidates to view the process as a collaborative one. "Ideally, I would like to hire this way every other year," Adams said.

But this time, the process worked. From a pool of 16 candidates, Olin hired nine. Four full-time assistant professors — among them Houston-Edwards and Graeff — and two visiting professors will begin this fall. Three more full-time faculty members will arrive the following academic year.

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