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Panel: Age Discrimination Issues in Higher Education - Handout: Essay on Age Discrimination in Faculty Hiring (R. McKee)

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Essay on age discrimination in faculty hiring

Submitted by Robert J. McKee on August 13, 2014 - 3:00am

Anyone who has ever completed an application for a full-time faculty position at a college or university in the U.S. has found themselves responding to the question of diversity. Colleges routinely ask how you will contribute to their culture of diversity. In many cases, the institution requests a separate letter on the subject. But despite their high-minded statements about diversity, I am convinced that colleges and universities in the U.S. are among the most ageist institutions when it comes to hiring. Their practices have left me to conclude that there is no college for old men (or old women, for that matter).

I am 62. I earned a master's degree in sociology in 1990, as a single dad and while working full-time. Soon afterward I began a part-time teaching career at the local community college, while continuing to work full-time as a corporate risk manager. I left the corporate world and returned to graduate education in 2008 to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology, graduating first in my cohort in 2012. Along the way, I was awarded the Norman K. Denzin Qualitative Research Award, my university's Public Sociologist of the Year Award, and the College of Liberal Arts Dissertation of the Year Award. In addition, I received numerous small grants to continue my research and present at conferences.

A Discussion of Age Discrimination

Robert McKee will discuss the issues raised by this essay on [This Week @ Inside Higher Ed](#) ^[1]. [Click here](#) ^[2] to receive an email notification when the audio program is published later today.

My dissertation was adapted into a book. I have also published seven journal articles. While earning my doctorate, I continued to teach myriad courses at the university and community college, receiving excellent evaluations from my students and the administration.

Shortly after graduating in 2012, I began applying for open faculty positions around the country. To date, I have applied for more than 60 positions. Since then, I received two phone interviews — one turned into an on-campus visit — and no job offers. I will grant you that for some of those faculty positions I should have known better. It is rumored that the top 100 colleges and universities can be very incestuous when it comes to hiring.

So there you have it. I have over 20 years of teaching experience at the college and university level, a doctorate, a book, seven journal articles, excellent evaluations, a national award, and two regional awards. And oh, did I mention I am also a Vietnam-era veteran? Just about every job in academia for which I applied required a statement about how I would be able to contribute to their righteous cause of diversity. Yet, when given the opportunity, they fail time and again to live up to their high-minded ideals when it comes to hiring those of us over the age of 40. Instead, they continue to hire younger, less-experienced applicants.

I know there may be some university hiring committees or their human resources personnel who will dispute this claim. They will argue that they receive hundreds of applications from some very well-qualified applicants. And that the hiring process is fair and blind to such matters as age. They might also argue that my case is unique — a sample of one.

But the evidence is overwhelming and the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) is slowly beginning to recognize this egregious inequality. In 2008, the EEOC sued San Francisco State University in federal court, in response to a charge of age discrimination where the university hired a 31-year-old A.B.D. applicant over the 61-year-old Ph.D. with 30 years of teaching experience. [3] In 2006, the EEOC sued Wilbur Wright College [4] accusing it of a pattern of hiring that discriminated against older applicants. In that case, 68-year-old Rosemary Crane, who taught English there part-time for eleven years, was passed over four times for full-time positions. For two openings in 2004, she didn't even receive an interview. Instead, the college hired two people ages 29 and 30.

In July of this year, the EEOC filed a federal lawsuit against Chicago's Harold Washington College [5] on behalf of Nancy Sullivan. Sullivan, a 66-year-old adjunct professor who had worked for the college's English department since 2006, applied for a full-time position in 2011 and was passed over for younger, less experienced candidates.

These very same institutions hire adjuncts to teach courses year after year, but then hesitate to even consider these same instructors when a tenure-track position opens up. Time and again they are dismissed in favor of younger, less-experienced applicants. This seems to be true even for positions that are specifically teaching-oriented.

Yes, I am aware that getting a job in academe has become increasingly difficult in recent years, regardless of age. But there still seems to be a very clear bias toward hiring younger, less-experienced applicants over older, more-qualified ones. Many institutions have advised applicants who did not land a tenure-track position right after college to be patient and persistent.

But as we see in the case of Colorado State University, hiring committees have gotten more insidious in their efforts to discriminate against older Ph.D.s. A job posting by the university [6] in 2012 listed as the first requirement: "A Ph.D. in English or American Studies or closely related area awarded between 2010 and the time of appointment." When questioned about the ad, the search committee argued that the language for the position opening was crafted to denote that the position was entry-level, with a correspondingly entry-level salary. While perhaps appearing to be innocuous, this ad has the effect of discriminating against older applicants and those who have been working as adjuncts for a few years while hoping to secure a tenure-track position. I am sure many of those applicants who have been looking for a full-time tenure-track job for more than three years would be thrilled to have this entry-level position.

If I and thousands of others in my same situation are wrong, then let the academic institutions prove it. It is time for the colleges and universities in the U.S., large and small, private and public, to report on the percentage of faculty new hires for entry-level tenure-track positions in the last 10 years that were over the age of 40. My guess is that number is in the very low single digits. I am certain they will not heed this call for full disclosure. I am also calling for the U.S. Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to require such reporting from the academic institutions in this country. And to pursue charges against those who show a propensity to discriminate against older applicants.

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[5] <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/breaking/chi-eeoc-harold-washington-college-passed-over-job-applicant-because-of-age-20140731-story.html>

[6] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/09/11/colorado-state-criticized-job-posting-favoring-recent-phds>

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