

Furthering Virtual Hiring Practices in Student Affairs: The Result of a Global Pandemic

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The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak has disrupted the way of life around the world. As of April 28th, 2020, there have been over 3 million confirmed cases, and 209,112 confirmed deaths in 213 countries/territories. Many higher education institutions have now transitioned to online learning, started work from home policies for employees, and have closed campuses. Amidst this chaotic environment, we find graduate students and current professionals in the middle of their job search. There are already many aspects of the student affairs job search process that create barriers for future student affairs professionals and COVID-19 has only worsened the situation. Institutions and departments need to reevaluate their hiring procedures to incorporate video telecommunication technology into every aspect of their process. It is crucial now more than ever to ensure that our hiring practices are clear, equitable, and ethical during this crisis and what comes after.

The ACPA and NASPA Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Educators document was created to establish a common set of professional competency areas for the field. Implementing virtual hiring practices requires someone in the department to have good technology competency skills and a clear understanding of organizational hiring practices. Technology (TECH) and Organizational and Human Resources (OHR) are two competency areas under this document. Ethical hiring practices are a clear priority for the field. Below are some outcomes under OHR.

- Ability to describe ethical hiring techniques and institutional hiring policies, procedures, and processes.
- Advocate for equitable hiring practices, develop recruitment and hiring strategies that increase individuals from under-represented groups to apply for positions.
- Discern the pace in which technological advances should appropriately be incorporated into organizational life.

There are two categories of interviews conducted over the internet: synchronous and asynchronous interviews. Synchronous interviews occur in real-time through the internet through sites/software like Zoom, Webex, Skype, Google Hangouts, etc. Asynchronous interviews do not happen in real-time; the candidate video records themselves answering interview questions through sites/software like SparkHire. Asynchronous interviewing is a newly emerging practice, but both have their pros and cons. Regardless of which type an institution uses, they can save money by eliminating the cost of traveling and lodging associated with in-person interviews. Most departments already have access to this software as many institutions pay for the licensing, meaning that departments would not need to invest themselves. There are also plenty of free alternatives that departments can utilize to conduct virtual interviews. This process requires candidates to have access to technology and internet services, but many resources like career service departments are now providing interview rooms equipped with this technology. You can also easily utilize this software on your mobile devices through mobile applications.

The student affairs field already slowly started to adopt the utilization of video telecommunication software to conduct first-round and second-round interviews. As a result of

COVID-19, we have seen the exacerbated wide adoption of virtual hiring practices across many institutions overnight. To reduce travel during this pandemic, institutions have temporarily moved away from the traditional on-campus interview and have started to incorporate virtual on-campus interviews. Traditional on-campus interviews present issues of accessibility and cost of travel for candidates. Virtual on-campus interviews have mitigated some of those issues. Job placement exchanges create a place for candidates to connect and interview with multiple institutions in the span of a few days. Regional placement exchanges, like the Oshkosh Placement Exchange, have been around for 40+ years. The Placement Exchange (TPE) is one of the national placement exchanges that conducts over 13,084 interviews during TPE On-Site. TPE On-Site, also referred to as the “cattle call” by some student affairs professionals, can create financial and economic barriers for many candidates and institutions. Many graduate students already face disparities for not being paid a living wage and there has been a surge of protests, strikes, and union formations for \$15 per hour minimum wages. Some have utilized websites like GoFundMe asking for donations to have the opportunity to attend placement exchanges or on-campus interviews.

TPE On-Site was supposed to take place in late March in Austin, Texas but due to COVID-19 concerns, it was canceled and replaced with TPE Virtual. This shift to a virtual platform allowed candidates to receive refunds on hundreds of dollars for flights, conference costs, hotels, and save on planned expenses. Candidates who experience physical or cognitive disabilities also may have a hard time navigating these jam-packed loud spaces when compared to the new virtual interview experience. Institutions can also face disparities as schools with lower budgets may not be able to afford the travel, lodging, and time costs associated with these in-person placement exchanges. By having gone virtual this year, it gave every institution and candidate an equal playing field. Going virtual-only for these placement exchanges forever is not realistic, but now that we have seen that it is possible, they can incorporate a virtual experience alongside their in-person interview events to bring a more diverse pool of applicants into the field.

Recognizing that Human Resources (HR) departments are often involved in these hiring processes, departments who are currently hiring should focus on their communication with HR to fully understand the implications and restrictions that may be imposed on the department and candidates as a result of COVID-19. As institutions are adapting and forming their new hiring practices, they should remember to develop practices that align with their diversity, equity, and inclusion mission statements. Posting job salaries, allowing candidates to read the interview questions (in-person or online) during their interview to mitigate cognitive impairments, and continuing to offer virtual hiring practices after the pandemic is over are all practices that can further their mission to create equitable spaces. Most importantly, departments must work with HR to ensure that candidates are being communicated with a clear, consistent and routine basis regarding their status in the process, especially if there is a current hiring freeze at the institution. Many institutions will cut professional development funds for staff as a result of budget concerns, but departments must invest and focus on technology competence training and development if the field is going to intentionally engage with candidates virtually.

As we move through this difficult time in our field, and with 83% of recently surveyed university presidents anticipating or started hiring freezes, the pressure and stress on candidates will be substantial. As institutions are being forced to utilize virtual hiring practices by the current

pandemic, it is pertinent to ensure that these developing practices do not exacerbate the already disheartening situation for candidates. With the sudden and drastic implementation of virtual interviews, departments must ensure that these processes should be efficient, effective, and humanizing. After the pandemic, we must consider the critical implications of reverting back to the old hiring practices. We must commit to continually innovate and improve the hiring practices for our field.