

Hiring Great Teachers, Avoiding Logistical Nightmares

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Like many overseas Marylanders approaching their fourth and final year overseas, I was worrying about how to “re-enter.” Interviewing in the US from some remote corner of Asia presented a major problem, of course, and explaining just what I’d been doing the last few years to traditional academic recruiters another. When Area Director for Southeast Asia, John Mack, suggested a weekend fishing trip in the Gulf of Thailand, with Ray Ehrensberger, I didn’t think of re-entry. “Big Daddy” as everyone called the UMUC chancellor, was a legendary figure in UMUC history, and I wanted to see what all the discussion was about. Our fishing trip occurred in the fall of 1973 when I was teaching at Utapao Air Base in Thailand.

We began drinking beer on the fishing boat in the early afternoon. After his second beer, Ehrensberger invited me to take a new job in College Park, Assistant to the Dean for Overseas Programs. He explained I’d work for another overseas legend, Mason G. (Bob) Daly, now Dean of UMUC, and together we would revamp the overseas hiring of new faculty. I didn’t need much time to think about this and accepted before finishing my second beer.

Bob Daly had been director in both Europe and Asia. He’d also piloted landing craft at Normandy and Okinawa. I was suitably impressed before even meeting him. But his approach to recruiting “the right kind of faculty” impressed me even more. We would be hiring 40-60 new faculty each year, and we needed a more systematic process of finding and evaluating them. My first job would be to come up with an outline to guide our efforts, one that looked at teaching excellence first and then at suitability for the peripatetic life on overseas military bases. He suggested I talk with Ellie Seidel, assistant to Ray Ehrensberger, who had been involved in recruiting and also with the overseas directors in Europe and Asia. Once I had some ideas, we’d discuss.

A few months into the project, Bob approved hiring another staff member to assist both with overseas recruiting and stateside dean’s office duties. We were fortunate to find John Golembe who held a College Park history doctorate. He joined the overseas recruiting team and eventually went to work in the European Division where he ended his service as its director.

What I came up with under Bob’s direction, guided overseas recruiting for many years to come. The first paper we developed concerned, naturally enough, teaching excellence. Bob told me the overseas programs survived on the basis of good classroom teaching. If we failed there, the Education Officers across the military services and the military contracting agencies would replace us. So, we developed several recruiting guideposts to focus on teaching:

- Listen carefully to what candidates says about teaching without leading them. This can be very informative.
- Check references, especially of those who may have visited candidates’ classes.
- If at all possible, visit classes of candidates or attend sessions of conferences where they presented.
- Review classroom material.

We also revamped how we reached candidates. We expanded advertising and visits to academic conferences in fields where the overseas programs needed faculty, business, political science, history, English, sociology, biology and psychology, to name several. Here it was easy to conduct 15-minute screening sessions and invite top candidates to all day interviews in College Park.

As I was looking over the files from earlier recruiting efforts, I came across a pretty surprising note. While I can't quote it exactly, the gist of this early 1960s statement was: "UMUC does not intend to send young women overseas to teach on U.S. military bases." We tossed that note out and never looked back.

Another uniquely Maryland overseas recruiting issue concerned the ability to teach basic courses in two academic disciplines. That was important for scheduling faculty on small, often isolated bases where there might well be only one Marylander. So, a person with a master's degree in English and PhD in history could "cover" courses in two disciplines. In my case, I'd been approved to teach in political science and European history, something I'd never understood as a plus until I started recruiting.

Once we had identified several top candidates for positions in the European, Atlantic and Far East Divisions, the next step Bob wanted me to think about was suitability for the overseas life. That puzzled me at first. But Bob was relentless. He told me "logistical nightmares" could do almost as much damage to the overseas programs as poor teachers. He related several stories of faculty who could not adapt to the constant travel or to the military rules. How do we avoid logistical nightmares? Together we worked out some guidelines on the positive side. We looked for faculty with the following experiences:

- Significant overseas travel. This meant a year or more abroad in research, work or junior year. Brief trips to Europe showed us nothing about adaptation to the Maryland overseas programs.
- Military service was a plus, and overseas military service even better. In an age when many young men spent a year or two in service it was not hard to find potential faculty with this background.
- Peace Corps was one of the best indications of ability to adapt.
- Finally, did the candidate really want our job knowing all about the frequent travel and military restrictions? Or was he or she seeking any job? (I always kept in mind something my colleague and friend Joe Arden told me about his reaction to Joe Mabbett's offer to teach in Asia: "You mean you are paying me to travel around Asia...?")

Once recruited, we tried to provide as much information to the newbies as we could. A few years into the job, I organized a newsletter called "Letters to a Friend" in which people I'd recruited wrote about their experiences to help new faculty understand the program they were joining.

My best experiences in this job were working with Bob Daly, recruiting some great people to teach overseas and hiring my wife, Patricia Wallace. We recently celebrated our 40th anniversary.