Rising Above Cognitive Errors: Guidelines for Search, Tenure Review, and other Evaluation Committees

by JoAnn Moody, PhD, JD, National Diversity Consultant and Director
Northeast Consortium for Faculty Diversity
www.DiversityOnCampus.com

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Summary of Speech
Cognitive scientists are proving definitively that many of the selection and evaluation tasks we undertake on a daily basis are alarmingly "contaminated." The contaminants— what can be generically termed cognitive errors and shortcuts—are present in academia as we gather and short through information, interpret it, and then come to decisions and evaluations about, for instance, job candidates, tenure and promotion cases, grant and fellowship applicants.

During these intense cognitive processes, all or most of us unwittingly commit a variety of errors and automatically take shortcuts. If we are rushed and distracted, then the errors and shortcuts multiply. In such situations, it is easy to appreciate the humor and truth in the epigram: "Search committees represent academia at its most dysfunctional." When those involved in searches and other evaluations are not given the opportunity to be thorough, deliberate, and careful in their decision-making, then dysfunction will result.

How can all of us, especially those serving on important gate-keeping committees, learn to identify and then rise above cognitive errors and shortcuts that typically mar evaluation processes? I want to share several strategies drawn from my new monograph released in early April 2005: Rising Above Cognitive Errors: Guidelines for Search, Tenure Review, and other Evaluation Committees. These practical strategies, developed and refined over the past two years of my consulting "in the field" with a variety of campuses and departments, deepen the insights presented in chapter four of my 2004 book, Faculty Diversity: Problems and Solutions (Routledge, New York).

First, evaluators and decision-makers must become aware of the typical cognitive errors and shortcuts that they unwittingly make. With the help of cognitive and social scientists, cultural anthropologists, economists, courtroom judges, and management experts, I have isolated 15 errors that I introduce to academic power-holders, using active-learned approaches. For instance, I compose short Discussion Scenarios (mini case studies) and embed in them several of these errors and shortcuts. I then ask faculty and administrative participants to share with me and with one another the good and bad practices they see in the scenarios (the scenarios sketch a search, tenure review, or other evaluation committee in action). Following the analysis of a scenario, I ask for thoughts about what the

evaluation committee chair (dramatized in the scenario) could have done to prevent or remedy some of the errors illustrated in the scenario. And further, what should the department chair, the dean, or the provost (none of whom is shown in the scenario) have done differently?

Given my time constraints today, I will name only a few of these typical errors that I focus on and embed in scenarios. They include the longing to clone, elitism, seizing a pretext, and negative and positive stereotyping.

Today I also want to mention several dysfunctions within academic organizations that can and usually do intensify the severity of the cognitive errors. These dysfunctions include rushing and overloading evaluation committees, failing to coach and practice an evaluation committee before it begins it work, and requiring no accountability with the committee process and no accountability for results.

To conclude, let me name several steps that evaluation committee members—and indeed all of us—can take to rise above the cognitive errors as well as remedy the organizational bad practices. These steps include: careful coaching and practicing of an evaluation committee so that members can name and rise above typical cognitive errors; using a matrix to keep committee members on track; insistence on "show me the evidence" as opposed to accepting mere opinions with the evaluation process; and a non-voting process person (a senior faculty member from outside the department) participating in all aspects of the committee's work, to keep members away from cognitive quicksand. These practical steps, together with a number of others discussed in my new monograph, can guide us to higher ground and to more careful and deliberate evaluations and decision-making within academia.