

UC Riverside Cluster Hiring Initiative

UCR's current strategic plan ([UCR 2020](#)) challenged the campus to attain the profile of an AAU institution, and envisioned a focused academic hiring effort in priority areas to help achieve this goal:

“UCR selected attaining the profile of an AAU institution as a guidepost for academic excellence because the organization focuses on metrics of importance to research-intensive universities, including funding for research and creative activity, research policy issues, and graduate and undergraduate education.” – UCR 2020, pp. 6

“Through careful examination of UCR's existing strengths, faculty leadership, and ability to address regional, state, national, or global concerns, the chancellor identified the following strategic priorities. Each is broad enough to encompass multiple clusters of research and creative activity. Seed funding will be provided to encourage groups of faculty to come together and develop proposals that will enable them to leverage resources and establish innovative areas of excellence within these broad themes. Over the course of the next 10 years, UCR will also require additional faculty and staff within these broad strategic areas, building on comparative and competitive advantages and creating the critical mass necessary for national and international preeminence.” – UCR 2020 pp. 13

The strategic plan was created in 2008-09, just as the country was entering the Great Recession and at the beginning of several years of high unemployment, low home values, and reduced state tax revenues. Therefore, aggressive pursuit of the growth and expansion elements of the strategic plan were deferred while the campus focused its attention on mitigating the effects of budget cuts, furloughs and layoffs.

Chancellor Wilcox arrived on campus in 2013 when state revenues were just beginning to return to their pre-recession levels. However, the campus budget remained opaque, so an effort was undertaken to make it simpler, more transparent, and better aligned with campus goals. Moreover, conservative fiscal management during the economic downturn allowed the campus to accumulate financial resources and thus invest in priorities outlined in the strategic plan.

Concurrently, campus leadership recognized that progress towards attaining the profile of an AAU institution had been hampered by our inability to grow faculty numbers. UCR already had a high quality faculty—and had successfully preserved that quality during the downturn—but its overall profile (in terms of aggregate measures such as total number of publications, total number of citations, total grant expenditures, numbers of graduates, etc.) was limited due to insufficient scale.

Cluster Hiring Initiated

Consistent with UCR 2020, campus leadership decided to allocate significant financial resources, both cash and permanent funding, to a major faculty hiring initiative. The aspirational goal was to grow the faculty by 300, increasing the total size from 671 in 2013 to 971 by 2020: 50 new clinical faculty members in the medical school, 19 new teaching professors (LPSOE/LSOE), and 231 new ladder faculty. Of the 231 ladder faculty, a significant percentage would be hired through a centrally-funded “cluster hiring” initiative that would aim to build critical mass of expertise in priority areas of research and creative activity. The cluster hiring initiative was closely aligned with several goals and strategies identified in UCR 2020:

- Strategic Goal #1: Academic Excellence – Developing a Preeminent Research University for the 21st Century
 - Strategy #1.1: Increasing Extramural Grant Funding
 - Strategy #1.2: Fostering Interdisciplinary Centers
 - Strategy #1.5: Identifying and Hiring in Areas of Strategic Priority
- Strategic Goal #2: Access – Enhancing Opportunity for Graduate, Professional, and Undergraduate Students
 - Strategy #2.A.1: Growing Graduate and Professional Enrollment
 - Strategy #2.A.3: Increasing Graduate Student Support
 - Strategy #2.B.1: Enhancing Student Success
- Strategic Goal #3: Diversity – Serving as a National Exemplar for Diversity, Inclusiveness, and Community
 - Strategy #3.3: Increasing Diversity of Faculty, Graduate Students, and Staff

The first step in the cluster hiring initiative was to invite all faculty to submit proposals for cluster areas during the 2014-15 academic year. [Faculty were encouraged](#) to build cross-disciplinary teams, to motivate and justify growth in the proposed area, to address space and other needs, and to assess the potential for extramural funding and for further diversifying the faculty. A total of 128 proposals were received (available [here](#)).

UCR’s Vice Chancellor for Research and Economic Development convened a committee of faculty and staff to review the proposals. The committee evaluated each proposal using a five-point scale on each of ten criteria:

1. Building preeminent research excellence
2. Bridging or enabling research in multiple areas
3. Creating a new focus that crosses traditional school or department lines
4. Creating a new focus within a department or school
5. Moving from good to great
6. Building on excellence
7. Increasing federal funding
8. Retaining strengths that will retire within a few years
9. Diversity
10. Funding potential

When the reviews were complete, proposals were grouped into each of the six priority areas that had been identified previously in UCR 2020:

1. From Genomics to Harvest: The Basic Science, Cultivation, and Production of Plants and Food
2. Next Generation Technologies: New Materials, Phenomena, and Devices
3. Mind and Body: Advances in the Study of Human Health and Well-Being
4. Renewable Nature: Environment, Energy, and Sustainable Development
5. Revitalizing Communities: Impact in Education and Social Policy
6. New Voices and Visions: The Global Studio of the Creative and Performing Arts

Campus leadership then discussed the top-ranked proposals in each area, including the total number of hires requested, likely home colleges for those hires, space and other needs, and the available resources

to fund the initiative. Ultimately a plan was agreed upon that would fund 139 new faculty hires in 34 clusters across the six priority areas. Meanwhile, deans would continue using college/school resources to hire faculty in other areas of need.

During early fall of 2015, a steering committee was established by the Provost to provide coordination and oversight to the hiring initiative across the academic units. The committee consisted of the Associate Provost (Chair) and an Associate Dean or other decanal appointee from each college and school. Fundamentally, the process for running cluster searches was modeled closely on the preexisting campus process for running “college hires” – hires for which the home department is not predetermined when the search is advertised. A lead college/school was identified for each cluster and the dean of that college/school nominated a faculty member to chair the search. Upon acceptance of the nomination, the chair received an [appointment letter](#) that included details about running the search.

During the first round of hiring in 2015-16, the deans suggested names of possible search committee members that were shared with each search chair upon appointment. The Associate Provost then worked with each search chair to nominate a search committee before sending the list of nominees to the steering committee for approval. To help further diversify the faculty, the steering committee required that each search include among its selection criteria the following statement: “The candidate’s potential or demonstrated ability to successfully work with and benefit a diverse student body.” The steering committee also required that the selection plan for each search include details about how the faculty in potential home departments would be involved in the search process. This was done to help ensure that the search committees would produce candidates that departments felt were viable, and thus to help promote successful search outcomes. Finally, the steering committee required language in each advertisement to draw attention to the cluster hiring initiative generally, believing this would be attractive to potential applicants.

Campus Feedback on Cluster Hiring

During the 2015-16 cluster hiring cycle, a total of 44 cluster hires were completed. Departments reported that candidates were of high quality and overall more diverse than in recent hiring cycles. However, many participating faculty and department chairs were frustrated and unhappy with the initiative. The Academic Senate [conducted a survey and shared the results with the Provost by memo](#). There were six prominent recommendations:

1. Greater consultation with the faculty when developing major new initiatives.
2. Use of limited trials (pilots) of major new initiatives.
3. A more transparent proposal selection process and periodic updates on the hiring effort.
4. Improved efficiency in the proposal submission and search processes.
5. Better follow-through on past promises, especially the plan to have a second call for proposals.
6. Allocating resources to help cluster hires pursue cross-disciplinary work on campus.

Some of these recommendations were germane for future initiatives while others could help to improve the current cluster hiring initiative. The Provost agreed to provide periodic updates and tasked the Associate Provost with determining how to improve the search process. The Associate Provost interviewed roughly half of the search chairs and met with the Faculty Senate Executive Committee of each college/school as well as some department chairs. These conversations revealed both the benefits and drawbacks of the current approach. Benefits included:

- Increased likelihood that a coherent set of hires is achieved, compared to a more disparate set if departments had more control
- Greater opportunities to break down departmental silos, diversify the faculty in multiple ways, and foster interdisciplinary work.
- Rapid attainment of critical mass in priority areas and associated benefits.

Drawbacks included:

- Departments feeling undermined and marginalized.
- Inherent incentive for departments to compete for positions rather than cooperate/collaborate.
- Some search chairs feeling overwhelmed by additional work associated with the search (more approvals, more people involved, more applications received, more conflicts) and disengaged from the search process because many hires would not end up in their home departments.
- Some search committee members feeling confused by and detached from the search process.
- Very fast pace of hiring that caused faculty and staff to feel overwhelmed due to the sheer number of ongoing searches, which sometimes led to low participation rates by faculty and also exceeded the campus' ability to provide proper space for new hires.

Adjustments to Cluster Hiring

The Provost's Deans Council discussed these findings and weighed alternative paths forward, ranging from minor adjustments to the process to more fundamental changes to the hiring initiative. Ultimately, it was decided to implement a set of smaller changes focused on reducing workload, promoting engagement and participation, and avoiding problems with space:

1. The pace of hiring would be slowed.
2. Search committees would be kept smaller.
3. A [detailed appointment letter would be developed for all search committee members](#), rather than just for the chair.
4. Steering committee members would help search chairs build their committees.
5. The Associate Provost would meet with each search chair to [provide guidance](#) on how to run a successful cluster search, based on lessons learned from the 2015-16 hiring cycle.
6. Before approving the short list for campus interviews, the Associate Provost would request confirmation from the search chair that plans for engaging with departments were being followed and that appropriate space had been identified by potential home departments.
7. A web-based calendar would be maintained by the Provost's office to list all job talks and help promote participation and attendance.

More significant changes were avoided both to help preserve the perceived benefits of the cluster approach and also anticipating that faculty and staff would benefit from implementing a process that was fundamentally similar to the one implemented in the previous year, thus avoiding the additional demands of adapting to a substantially new process.

Changes under New Leadership

In December of the 2016-17 hiring cycle, the Provost stepped down and an Interim Provost was appointed. Hiring continued and a total of 27 hires eventually were completed. Also during this time, the

Academic Senate conducted a [second survey focused on cluster hiring and identified the following major/recurring themes that were shared with the campus and Provost in August 2017](#):

- Concern over fundamental lack of coordination/symbiosis between cluster hiring initiatives and departmental hiring/research/teaching plans.
- Concern over the role of departments in reviewing and selecting faculty members hired through clusters.
- Concern about the conceptual design, coordination, and short-to-long-term implementation of the program.
- Concern over possible links between cluster hiring initiative, diminishing research/teaching capacity, and retention of faculty members, including those hired through clusters.
- Expression of need for more robust engagement with faculty and departments prior to, during, and after the recruitment process to ensure that prospective faculty members will be well-supported by their home departments/colleges/schools.
- Concern over inconsistency in relative success and failure of cluster searches.
- Expression of need for infrastructural support for newly hired faculty members (including those not hired through clusters).
- Expression of need for more consistent and substantive processes to integrate new faculty members into campus research and teaching infrastructure/protocols (e.g. office and lab setup, renovations to office and research spaces, more staff support for facilitating needs of newly arrived faculty).
- Expression of desire for more effective use of faculty/staff labor and time in the cluster recruitment and hiring process.
- Concern over implications of the cluster hiring program for UCR's national and global reputation as a research university.
- Expression of need for administrative follow-up beyond the hiring process that builds support infrastructure for ongoing, sustainable research clusters that include "cluster-hired" faculty members as well as other faculty members in relevant research areas.
- Concern over lack of transparency in the cluster proposal review process.
- Concern that cluster hiring puts extreme stress on the resources and capacity required to fulfill the university's research and teaching mission.

In response, the Interim Provost announced a more significant reduction in the pace of cluster hiring, and approved only 11 searches for the 2017-18 hiring cycle. She also drafted a [white paper that summarized accomplishments to-date, remaining resources, and persistent challenges](#). The white paper also laid out three possible (though not exhaustive) paths forward, ranging from additional minor adjustments, to redirecting resources towards other campus priorities. The white paper was shared with the campus in November 2017, and feedback was received from the Academic Senate in March 2018. In response to this feedback and an assessment of how campus needs and priorities had evolved since 2014, the Provost [announced](#) the following in May 2018:

"First, we will no longer treat the remaining cluster hiring resources as separate from other central campus resources. Moreover, in 2018-19 there will be few, if any, centrally funded faculty hires. Due to our current budget outlook, I feel it is prudent to be conservative with these resources for the time being while we evaluate adjustments to the budget model in the coming months. Meanwhile, deans may of course use their college/school resources for academic hiring, including Target of Excellence and partner hires, and my office will

continue contributing to those start-up packages. In the future, I anticipate resuming an annual call for requests from the deans to use central campus resources to support additional strategic hiring in coordination with the college/school hiring plans. My office will evaluate these resource requests alongside other campus strategic needs.”

Current Status of Cluster Hiring

As of this writing, the cluster hiring initiative has filled just over half of the originally planned positions. Several more positions are currently open but unfilled. If all of these searches are eventually successful, around two-thirds of the original positions will have been filled. This represents significant progress towards the targeted academic growth that was envisioned in UCR 2020. The initiative also reinforced several lessons for the campus leadership, including:

- Effective consultation requires deliberately completing the loop and ensuring those who have been consulted feel their points of view have been understood and internalized.
- Small-scale piloting of major new initiatives can help identify unforeseen issues before they affect large numbers of people. Piloting also facilitates more gradual and successful culture change that can be crucial for the long-term viability of a new initiative.
- The academic hiring process is viewed by the faculty as being firmly on the faculty side of the shared governance balance. Administrative interventions are easily interpreted as overreach and can cause faculty to feel the balance has been upset.
- UCR’s academic structure is largely based on departments. These units not only work together but also compete with each other for resources. Initiatives that require extensive cross-departmental collaboration must effectively address this inherent competition.
- Change is necessary to improve institutional effectiveness, but too much change at once can overwhelm faculty and staff, and potentially undermine otherwise good ideas.