

Faculty Selection: Credentials vs. Qualifications

What criteria should guide biblical higher education leaders in faculty selection?

Virtually all postsecondary accreditation standards stipulate that, as a minimum, instructors must have earned accredited degrees at least one level above the level at which they teach. Thus, instructors teaching at the baccalaureate level must have completed at least a master's degree, including specified minimum course work in the subject area of instruction. This standard is one of three primary means of assuring that the actual level of instruction is indeed the level purported.¹ Although there are justifiable exceptions to this standard, in my experience biblical higher education institutions often have been far too ready to sacrifice this norm on the altar of expediency.

On the other extreme, oversimplified interpretation and application of accreditation standards often results in an equally regrettable equation of faculty credentials with faculty qualifications. Unfortunately, peer interpretation and application of accreditation standards tends to default to the simplest and most objective (thus, the "safest") compliance measures. Lack of requisite faculty credentials is most typically cited as exclusive and conclusive evidence of inadequate faculty member qualifications. While granting that institutional assertions of exceptional qualifications frequently may be inadequately grounded, I am concerned that the typical resulting focus upon academic credentials as the *sine qua non* of faculty qualification is equally wrongheaded. In practice, a single focus on credentials leads to the conclusion, (a) that credentials and qualifications are synonymous; and (b) that superior academic credentials constitute superior faculty qualifications. Nothing could be further from the truth. Academic credentials alone should never be regarded as sufficient faculty qualifications, particularly in institutions of biblical higher education. What set of criteria, then, should biblical higher education leaders employ in selecting, retaining, and promoting faculty? I would offer the following suggestions:

Credentials: Minimum academic credentials (i.e., earned degree at least one level above the students' instructional/degree level) must be adhered to if we are serious about asserting to the public that our educational programs and credentials are academically on a par with peer institutions in the higher education community. Failure to uphold these minimums undermines our legitimacy claims. We cannot set aside basic higher education standards and claim with any credibility that our education is postsecondary. Educational credentials, however, should be regarded as the threshold, not the totality of faculty qualification. Minimum credentials admit a prospective faculty member into consideration. The danger occurs when we consciously or unconsciously use earned degrees as the primary (or even exclusive) basis for judging the relative merits of current or prospective faculty members. Once instructors meet threshold academic credential requirements, other more consequential qualifications should be take precedence.

¹ Other means of assuring the appropriate instructional level include certification that students have, (a) successfully completed prerequisite educational levels; and (b) demonstrated that they have the capacity (e.g., via diplomas, grades, class rank, standardized test scores) to succeed at the present instructional level.

Contagious Character. *Students become like their teachers* (Luke 6:40). ... *Godliness is more caught than taught.* ... *Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.* Such clichés are not less true because they are familiar. Character matters in faculty selection. Blamelessness is a key biblical leadership quality and must unapologetically trump other considerations for faculty selection. Impressive academic credentials absent impeccable character cannot qualify faculty candidates for employment by institutions of biblical higher education. Superior faculty members should be sought not merely on the basis of commendable character but also on the basis of observable spiritual contagion.

Competence. We all have observed instructors who possess enviable credentials and admirable character but inferior command of their teaching discipline. In some cases, the person has failed to keep abreast of the latest research findings, professional dialogue, and methodological conventions within the discipline. Syllabi have not been updated for years; learning resource lists lack recent electronic and print sources. In other cases, authentic Christ-followers are virtual pagans when it comes to meaningful integration of biblical truth with the critical assumptions, methodological orthodoxies, seminal ideas, and key research findings in the discipline. We dare not settle for well-credentialed but relatively incompetent faculty members.

Communication. Superior qualifications in other areas do not offset an instructor's shortcomings as a facilitator of learning. Sadly, many well-credentialed, spiritually upright and professionally competent individuals either lack the gift of teaching or, more commonly, have neglected to devote themselves to mastering principles of teaching and learning (a remediable deficit). It is important to distinguish effective communication and effective teaching from giftedness in public speaking. Teaching involves talking, but it is not primarily about lecturing. Effective teaching results in student engagement and learning. A person may be quite an effective facilitator of learning yet lacking to some degree in rhetorical skills. An excellent lecturer who avoids student contact is not better qualified than an excellent mentor who engages learners.

Compatibility. Faculty members should be selected and retained on the basis of their strong fit with an institution's beliefs, values, and ethos. *Faculty* is a collective noun. Superior faculty members must be able to engage institutional colleagues and students in shared governance, educational collaboration, and conflict resolution. Faculty credentials and capabilities, no matter how incandescent, cannot offset the damage that occurs when an institution's "hidden curriculum" in spirituality and leadership is filled with dissonance.

Contribution. Strong faculties are not built of identical academic clones. Rather, a strong faculty will include members whose individual strengths and contributions vary and are weighted according to a broad range of faculty functions and educational priorities. Robert Clinton has suggested that a well-rounded faculty should include a balance of strengths in areas such as: life changing teachers, researchers, model ministry practitioners, recruiters, public communicators, networkers, student coaches/advisors, and curriculum/program developers.

So, how does this work in practice? Typically, we evaluate and rate potential faculty prospects something like this:

Prospect	Credentials	Character	Compatibility	Rank
John Smith	Ph.D Stanford	✓	✓	1
Sarah Brown	Ph.D Virginia Tech	✓	✓	2
Bob Booth	M. Div./D. Min. Trinity	✓	✓	3
Ann Edwards	M.A. Ball State/M.A. Dallas	✓	✓	4

In the above example, the unconscious thinking is ***all things being equal, the candidate with the stronger academic credentials (assuming the credentials correspond to the subject to be taught) should be considered the best qualified.*** Thus, since John Smith “checks out” in terms of character and compatibility, he is ranked as most desirable.

To embrace and implement the full range of criteria discussed above, however, we might employ a rubric such as the following:

Prospect	Credentials	Contagious Character	Competence	Communication	Compatibility	Contribution	Rank
Smith	5	2	3	3	4	Scholar	4
Brown	4	3	3	3	3	Teacher	2
Booth	3	4	4	5	4	Student coach	1
Edwards	3	5	2	4	4	Recruiter	3

Scale: 5 = superior; 4 = solid; 3= acceptable; 2 = marginally acceptable; 1 = unacceptable

In this case, the person whose academic credentials arguably ranked third turns out to be the best qualified in terms of the institution’s mission, educational philosophy and overall needs. Admittedly, assessments of character, competence, communication, and compatibility involve some subjectivity, even intuition, but to omit these critical variables from rigorous practical consideration has the potential to erode mission integrity one small drip at a time until the situation is tragically irremediable.

In the end, your faculty is your curriculum. You must recruit, screen, and retain them with diligence and discernment. There is no virtue in mediocrity. Biblical higher education leaders, of all people, should eschew a “minimum standard” mindset and heartily embrace excellence. But if by passivity and superficiality we permit excellence to be defined for us on the basis of alien—even hostile—educational values, we fail in our educational leadership. On the other hand, when we designate comprehensive criteria and implement meaningful measures for assessing the full spectrum of faculty qualifications, we achieve a more consequential if under-acknowledged excellence.