

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS
URBANA-CHAMPAIGN SENATE
Committee on Equal Opportunity and Inclusion
(Final; Information)

EQ. 16.01 Report on the Revised Background Check Policy formulated by the UA Committee under Vice President Pierre

Though we appreciate the changes to language in the policy that have addressed some issues previously raised, we remain concerned about language that is both ambiguous and imprecise in ways that 1) obscure the intended effects of the policy and 2) extend oversight into pre-employment validation processes for faculty hires that are currently understood to be the responsibility of units where faculty are being hired.

1. In the statement of the purpose of the policy in Section 1, the final sentence states, “The principles that underlie this policy are to support the academic quality, workforce diversity, and international reputation of the University.” This articulates the “principles” of the policy in a way that obscures the probability, repeatedly referenced in Senate discussions of the policy, that criminal background checks are likely to diminish, not support, “workforce diversity.” In addition to continued attention to whether the policy as a whole is at odds with University diversity values statements and equal opportunity guidelines, we think it is important for the policy itself to more accurately reflect an interest in applying such a policy in a way that acknowledges and seeks to reduce its likely negative impact on diversity hiring and retention.

In addition, in the language used for the principles underlying the Background Check policy, broad reference to “academic quality” is of concern on a number of counts. Vague references to “quality” have a long history of being used as code for academic norms of behavior and practice that have traditionally excluded underrepresented faculty and students. As a result, such language enhances the likelihood that qualified candidates will read this policy as an indication that their achievements may not be granted full consideration. Further concerns arise from the failure of such general uses of “quality” to capture the diverse metrics and criteria applied for specific units and faculty categories. A policy referring generally to “quality” checks in all of them, as opposed to the job-specific evaluations overseen by units familiar with rigorous discipline-specific criteria of strength in research, scholarship and teaching, appears too broad. Unit-specific processes that have been applied in the past appear more appropriate to us for both of these reasons.

Finally, this sentence re-introduces University “reputation” as part of what the policy is designed to protect. The EQ committee agrees with issues raised earlier from GUP about “reputation” as a criterion easily expanded in ways that can infringe on institutional commitments to academic freedom. Earlier in the paragraph “integrity” was substituted for the term “reputation.” “Integrity,” while a worthy principle in many uses, has similar problems here with regard to interpretation and application.

In light of these concerns, the EQ committee considered it more appropriate to word this sentence to indicate that the University strives to implement the policy in such a way as to not imperil academic missions and workforce diversity.

2. We have been concerned in earlier drafts that revisions extended the background check policy beyond the criminal background check procedures that were previously its focus. We consider it important for the policy to observe existing practices whereby units with expertise oversee pre-employment “verification of education and other credentials, employment history,” (addressed in section II, Overview, final paragraph) through the scholarly networks that already verify education, achievement, and employment. The current revision appears to do this by stating in the above referenced paragraph that each “campus, UA and UIHHSS have in place guidelines and/or procedures as well as best practices for conducting pre-employment background checks other than criminal background checks for their respective employees, consistent with the job description and applicable federal and state law.” This is an improvement inasmuch as it acknowledges current practices with regard to verification of education, other credentials and employment history, etc. being the purview of units with expertise in the area of a specific search. A statement about the importance of this unit-level expertise would still seem in order.

Additional areas of concern include:

We note that Campus, UA and UIHHSS units must set guidelines and/or procedures that comply with and are consistent with policy. Is there some campus input into the definitions of what “consistency” involves?

Section II: Individuals Covered: this also seems to have expanded, including Postdoctoral Research Associates.

V Periodic Assessment:

We are pleased to see a presentation of assessment plans. We note that the need for such assessment on impact of the Policy on “the academic quality, workforce diversity, and international reputation of the University,” confirms our concern, outlined above, that diversity in particular is potentially damaged, rather than supported, by this policy. Should the policy go forward, we would recommend more regular oversight.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AND INCLUSION

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