



**SUSTAINABLE CAREER MAPS FOR [HIRE ED]**

**Identifying and Transforming Oppressive Hiring  
Practices in Higher Education and Student Affairs**

**COVER LETTERS**

# CONTENTS

<b>THIS RESOURCE: WHY + HOW + WHEN</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>GROUNDED FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>USING COVER LETTERS CLEARLY</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>ANTIDOTAL PRACTICES</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>NEXT STEPS</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: CONTENT AUTHORS</b>	<b>19</b>

## WHY THIS RESOURCE?

ACPA’s Report on 21st Century Employment in Higher Education offered “a call to action meant to serve as a guiding framework for a sustainable future for the profession.” To make further meaning of the analysis and recommendations of the report, members of ACPA’s Commission for Career Services, an entity group of educators, developed a suite of supplemental resources intended to support higher education and student affairs (HESA) practitioners as they, “work, lead, and support their career and the careers of those around them.”

*While the functional area of career services is primarily toward students, the authors took a collegial lens with aims to inform HESA practitioners for the wellness of their career and the careers of those around them. As career services educators, regular interactions with employers across industries and students across disciplines have led us to believe these resources will help to critically examine problematic workplace norms in higher education that are often not identified or addressed.*

# HOW TO APPROACH THIS RESOURCE

## (1) Begin with clarity for resource intention

- This resource identifies the overt and subtle characteristics of organizational [supremacist] culture in hiring models.

## (2) Comprehend the problem deeper

- “Okun’s (2021) White Supremacy Culture framework illuminates the conception, continuation, and legacies of white supremacy in the United States.” Guided by this framework, this resource connects common HESA hiring practices to systems that maintain white supremacist culture in the field.

## (3) Review examples and considerations for improvement

## (4) Prepare actions for implementing

# WHO SHOULD USE THIS RESOURCE?

## **(PRIMARY) HESA Job Seekers/Candidates**

**RED COLOR DENOTES THIS AUDIENCE THROUGHOUT THE RESOURCE**

- By clarifying the purpose and intent of common hiring practices and acknowledging potential problems with each practice, this resource educates and empowers candidates to make intentional decisions during their searches. Ideally, this will result in candidates accepting roles at HESA institutions with aligned values.

## **(SECONDARY) HESA Hiring Managers and Allied Mentors\***

**GOLD COLOR DENOTES THIS AUDIENCE THROUGHOUT THE RESOURCE**

- Ultimately, to transform biased practices in higher education, current HESA professionals must also be able to identify and advocate for systemic reform.

# WHEN TO USE THIS RESOURCE

While reflecting on and journaling career impact

While researching and applying for specific roles

When responding to prompts during interviews

When articulating deliverables at professional development events

During performance reviews

\*While advising emerging HESA graduates and leading in professional hiring processes

# GROUNDING LOGIC + SCHOLARLY FRAMEWORK

The problems and recommendations in this document are based on lived experiences of ACPA professionals and peers. To honor relevant scholars and their work, we also cite a selection of sources to further contribute to a growing body of scholarship on these topics.

# USING COVER LETTERS TO COMMUNICATE CLEARLY



# DEFINING THE INTENT OF A COVER LETTER

**A cover letter is a tailored writing sample that allows the candidate to tell the story of how their background and aspirations align with the hiring organization's needs. It is intended to contextualize a résumé and help form a more holistic portrait of the applicant prior to and during interview(s).**

## NAMING A KEY PROBLEM

Of Okun’s (2021) seven-domains used to “understand the maintenance of white supremacy within HESA culture and organizations,” paternalism is deeply embedded in cover letter documents. Paternalism is, “those in power are assumed qualified and entitled to define standards and the one right way, and decision maker for the interests of those without power.”

**Candidates who align their qualifications and motivations more closely with those in power will likely advance in search processes but may not feel their application materials align with their authentic selves.**

# ANTIDOTAL COVER LETTER PRACTICES

## *TELL YOUR STORY*

The cover letter, while a vehicle for employers to understand a candidate's communication skills and problem-solving, has remained very static in formatting for decades. However, alternative forms of storytelling could both increase your opportunity to express your experiences and expertise while also providing employers with access to more diverse candidates.

# ANTIDOTAL JOB SEARCH PRACTICES

- **Workplace accomplishments aren't the only valuable narratives for candidates to share in a cover letter—and many relevant skills are gained outside of the workplace.**
- **Share mistakes and lessons learned that may be related to a position, along with skills gathered through “non-traditional” work including:**
  - **VOLUNTEER WORK**
  - **FAMILY DUTIES**
  - **HOUSEHOLD RESPONSIBILITIES**

# ANTIDOTAL JOB SEARCH PRACTICES

- **There are ways to tell your story beyond the cover letter (e.g., Video Essay/Monologue, Sample Podcast Episode, Blog Entry/Article, LinkedIn Posts). Have these prepared and ready to offer during your search process.**
- **All examples could be supported by prompts that engage current events or real-time issues pertaining directly to organization priorities while drawing directly from your perspectives and communication strengths.**

# ANTIDOTAL HIRING PRACTICES

## \*Hiring teams: Reviewing Cover Letters

- Read and listen for candidate sentiments that align with the seven domains of white supremacist culture and...
  - Seek to understand and validate their concerns
  - Challenge the notion that there is only one way to create a successful cover letter
  - Normalize the practice of customizing cover letters so there is less expectation of an ideal template

# NEXT STEPS + RECOMMENDATIONS

## Processes, procedures, and policy

- **Talk to employers about who they advance in the application process. Listen for language of resume biases like:**
  - **Only focusing on people who have done the same work in the past**
  - **Only focusing on people with no typos or minor errors in their resume**
  - **Setting aside candidates with any gaps in their resume**

# CALL/S TO ACTION

**There is only so much content to be offered without more personal context. The primary aim of this resource is to inform HESA practitioners about the wellness realities of their career and the careers of those around them.**

**Regular interactions with job-seekers across disciplines employers across industries (consider the sequence and power dynamics) lead us to believe that: this resource can help critically examine problematic workplace norms in higher education that are often not identified or addressed.**

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**CONSIDER THIS RESOURCE A PART OF PHASE ONE. CONTACT [NICK.FAHNDERS@GMAIL.COM](mailto:NICK.FAHNDERS@GMAIL.COM) FOR ANY IDEAS AND/OR FEEDBACK FOR PHASE TWO.**



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