The tricky talent hunt

Challenges varsities face in attracting and retaining staff

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ASK any student or lecturer here what the initials SMU stand for, and they will say Singapore Management University.

Ask the same question in the United States, and the answer is likely to be, uh, Southern Methodist University?

There is such a university (in Texas, circa 1911), and it has given Singapore’s SMU its fair share of identity problems, assistant director and head of faculty administration Judith Clarke (picture) told TODAY.

Especially at the major American academic conferences, which is where SMU goes to recruit international faculty.

Five years on, the identity crisis has lessened. But the challenge in attracting talented faculty to SMU remains.

“In Singapore, it has been so exciting to have a private university that is publicly funded. But it’s a huge challenge to sell that because, in Asia, public universities get the prestige while private universities are seen as the money-making types,” she said.

There has been progress, though. After the Sept 11 attacks, when the US stock market slid, so too did the endowments of many American universities which had invested in stocks.

“It was a knee-jerk reaction, but they panicked and stopped recruiting. That was our window of opportunity,” she said.

“It pulled down escalating salaries and brought things to a more manageable, realistic playing field.”

During that time, SMU found new deans for some of its schools, including Professor David Montgomery, reputedly the number two person in the marketing world. He came out of retirement to take the job.

That made it easier to attract junior faculty, though the competition did not let up.

To date, SMU has hired 158 full-time faculty members, eight of whom have left.

When it comes to attracting and retaining talented faculty, there are three issues in Singapore that are “causing headaches” for the university, she said.

The lack of a research culture is a major factor.

“Although the Government is setting up niche areas of research, these are still very much under its umbrella. But we are not bioscience, engineering or medicine. We are business,” she said.

Another factor working against recruiting foreign academic talent is the restriction on medical insurance. Employees cannot offer their staff coverage from an insurance company that does not have a Singapore office.

“Medical insurance is very locally focused. It’s built around CPF and MediSave. It doesn’t take into account that we have international people with international careers,” Ms Clarke explained.

More flexibility by the authorities in this area would help, she said.

The third hurdle is the “exorbitant” school fees of the international schools here, which are more suited for highly-paid MNC managers than for academia.

Ultimately, it would help all three local universities, which face similar challenges in attracting and retaining talented faculty, she believes.

Even if not all of them get confused with Southern Methodist University.