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Negotiating a Job Offer

By Mary Morris Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick

Question: I think in a day or two I'm going to get a one-year job offer from University A. I'm not very excited about it, but jobs are tight. Meanwhile, someone on the hiring committee at University B, a better institution where there is a tenure-track position, has told my adviser that "things are looking good." University B, however, has a reputation for paying very poor salaries. What do I do when the offer from University A comes through? I don't want to take it unless I'm absolutely desperate. If I'm lucky enough to get an offer in time from University B, should I try to negotiate for more money?

Julie: You have a dilemma that is not uncommon. You are right to recognize that although the job at University A is not what you want, in this job market it's not wise to dismiss anything without careful consideration. So, think about what you will say when University A calls with an offer. You need to sound pleased about receiving it and get the terms of the offer, which will also (or should also) be sent to you in writing. Then you need to state that you'll need some time to think about it and ask when they need an answer.

Mary: I wouldn't worry too much about getting the terms of an offer in writing until the end of the negotiation process. In some ways I think it's easier to negotiate before issues have hardened on paper. In any event, if University A makes an offer which also sounds low, indicate that you have some concern about the salary and ask whether it's negotiable. Negotiability may be limited to non-existent on a one-year position, but it's worthwhile to ask. Someone who tells you anything other than a flat-out no is probably willing to negotiate a bit. However, it's helpful to negotiate first for what you want most and, in this case, what you want most may be as long a time period as possible before you need to respond.

Julie: University A should be willing to give you some time. Then you need to contact the head of the search committee at University B, assuming that you've already interviewed there. If you haven't,
it's extremely unlikely that you'd get an offer before you needed to give an answer to University A. I'm also assuming that your adviser told you specifically what "looking good" meant, so that you're dealing with real information and not someone's over-optimism.

Let the head of the search committee at University B know you have another offer, but you need to do it in a way that makes it quite clear that University B is your first choice. Ask by what date they plan to make a decision. If the decision will be made well before University A's deadline, then you can relax a bit and wait to hear. The problem will be if it is after University A's deadline. Then you need to do some soul searching and possibly call in your adviser for assistance.

Mary: First, let me mention how long "some time" is likely to be. At this time of year, for a one-year position, you probably can't negotiate for a lot of it. Any reasonable employer should give you at least 24 hours. A week would be not uncommon. If you're given two weeks, you're lucky. Now, for the harder part. In the arena of professional employment, job acceptances are presumed to be binding. After accepting, applicants are expected to withdraw themselves from consideration for other positions. Has the occasional candidate been known to do otherwise? Well, of course, yes.

Julie: Personally, I think it is wrong to accept an offer, then renege on it when a second and better offer comes in. I am aware of the reasons that one might do that, and in this difficult job market, it is understandable. But I think one's word has to count for something, and a candidate diminishes his or her credibility by reneging. Such an act could follow one later on when applying for other jobs or fellowships or submitting publications.

On the other hand, a school might be willing to release one from a binding contract so as not to have an unhappy new professor. But personally, I don't recommend it. I think it's much better to try to negotiate with both institutions -- for more time from A and for B to make the decision sooner.

Mary: I agree. It's also not unknown for "more attractive" institutions to encourage candidates to back out of original commitments. If University B turned out to be such a place, how much do you think you could believe any assurances it gave you? I'd say categorically, don't even think about reneging on an offer without consulting with several highly experienced people in your field whose opinions you respect.
It's fine, however, to ask the more attractive place if they'd consider holding the position open for you for a year, if the offer comes through after you've made a commitment. Assuming it's a tenure-track position and they really want you, this may be possible. The most common reason for letting someone start a job a year late is to allow time to complete the dissertation, but it may be done occasionally for other reasons.

Julie: Let's take a happier scenario, where you get the University B offer before having to turn down University A, but, as you feared, the salary is low. How can you negotiate for more? The first thing is to find out what you can about salaries at this and comparable institutions. The American Association of University Professors does an annual survey of faculty salaries. A story on the 1997-98 figures, with links to salary tables for each state, appeared on April 10, 1998, in The Chronicle of Higher Education. The figures will be updated within the next few weeks. Using the A.A.U.P. tables, determine a reasonable salary, and then make your request.

Mary: Know that many places will expect you to negotiate salary, but that some places have more flexibility than others. Listen carefully to see whether you're being told that an increase is impossible, in which case, there may be no flexibility, or difficult, in which case there is. Often a department will have to request additional funds from a dean so you may not get an answer right away. If you need research facilities, these may also be part of the negotiation package. Other common parts of a negotiation package are teaching loads in the first year, summer research money, and travel money. Discussing in detail how you handle these elements is beyond the scope of this conversation, but be aware that departments that strongly want to recruit a candidate will sometimes develop creative packages by which to do so.

Julie: However, it sounds like whether you can increase the salary or improve the terms, you will accept University B's offer. Once you have accepted a job, you need to contact any place where you are still a candidate. Thank them for considering you but tell them that, as you have accepted an offer, you wish to be taken out of the running. It is the polite thing and the right thing to do, for then the search committee can continue reviewing those people who truly are candidates.

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