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**Negotiating That First Offer**

*By Jennifer S. Furlong and Julie Miller Vick*

**Question:** I had a very good campus interview, and someone on the search committee told me, unofficially, that I am the top choice. What should I do when I get the offer?

**Jenny:** Your situation calls to mind that old adage about not counting your chickens. You may very well be the top choice of the faculty member who confided that information to you. Unfortunately, you may not be the top choice of the search committee. Stories of candidates told they were the "top choice" who never received an offer are legion in academe (see the "Don't Believe Everything You Hear" section of this column about the experiences a Ph.D. in the social sciences had on the market).

Until you get a formal offer, you should proceed with your job search, to the point of planning what you will do if you receive no offers at all.

So what is a formal offer? Although the head of a search committee will usually call to say the job is yours, a formal offer is not a telephone call. It's a written offer of employment.

**Julie:** If an offer seems like a real possibility, spend some time thinking about how you will respond when it comes. What will you say when the committee chair calls with the good news? Will you accept on the spot? Or will you express pleasure at the news but have some questions to ask?

Many people don't like the idea of negotiating a job offer because it feels like haggling over items at a bazaar. However, the two couldn't be further apart. Sure, in both scenarios, you're trying to get the best deal for yourself. But unlike making a onetime purchase, examining a job offer and working to get what you need to do the job well will have a big impact on the rest of your career.

And it is expected that you will negotiate.
**Jenny:** Having received the official, written offer, you may be unsure how to proceed. You may have trouble even finding the words to begin negotiations, and worry about finding the right balance between asking for what you want and appearing collegial and positive.

**Julie:** One good way to avoid that sense of paralysis is to reflect on your own priorities.

- Is salary your most important concern?
- Are you worried about having enough money for conference travel?
- Are you a scientist who must have a specific piece of equipment to do your research, and the institution is hoping you'll share one already owned by another lab?
- Are you hoping to defer your employment for a semester so you can finish your dissertation or get some additional publications out?
- Would you be living far from the campus and thus prefer a high level of control over the scheduling of your classes?

Needs and negotiating points will differ from candidate to candidate, and will depend on each individual offer. But you need to be aware that negotiating every single aspect of an offer can make a candidate seem greedy. So before you call the chair to talk, you should know which of the offer's terms you are happy with and which are "deal breakers" for you.

**Jenny:** As you consider the offer, you might find some things that you would like to clarify with the head of the search committee. Those can be natural starting points for your negotiation. If you have a question, ask. Better to clarify those details now than to be unable to travel to a conference or order needed supplies a year from now.

**Julie:** You should also keep in mind the limitations of the institution itself. Public universities where faculty compensation is set by the state legislature may have less flexibility on salary than private institutions. A small liberal-arts college probably isn't going to be able to offer you unlimited lab space.

Candidates often tell us that junior faculty members at the institution are best able to advise on what the college can realistically offer, as they will have very recently gone through the
negotiating process. If you met with any helpful junior professors during your visit, you might reach out to them as you begin negotiating.

**Jenny:** If the salary seems very low, and you are concerned that it may prevent you from accepting the position, let the employer know that, and see what response you get before you ask for a specific number. You might say: "This is a fine opportunity, although the salary seems perhaps a little lower than what is paid for comparable jobs here. Can we discuss this?" (A good source for such data are the salary surveys conducted by the American Association of University Professors.)

Listen to the response as it will help you assess how much the employer can, or will, negotiate. Your future raises will be based on that initial sum, and you want to have a salary that makes you feel you are being paid what you are worth. But remember, salary is not the only negotiable condition of employment. Occasionally institutions with a limited ability to offer you a higher salary may be able to "sweeten the deal" by being flexible with other terms of your contract.

**Julie:** Here are some of those other negotiables:

- **Decision Date:** Don't feel that you have to accept an offer two days after you receive it. It is acceptable to negotiate for more time to think about it, especially if you are waiting to interview at other institutions or to hear about other outstanding offers. Be reasonable about that request. An institution will probably be willing to give you two weeks to make your decision but not two months.

- **Start-Up Package:** Standard for people in the sciences, it includes the money you will need to start and sustain a research program, at least until you get your first grant. That money can be used to purchase lab equipment and supplies, hire technicians, pay postdocs or graduate students, cover overhead costs, or obtain larger space.

- **Teaching Load and Teaching Schedule:** A faculty member's first year can be exhausting, especially if you are starting up an ambitious research program. For some candidates, it is advantageous to negotiate a reduced teaching load in either the first or second semester of that initial year. Similarly, a new faculty member might negotiate for a high level of control over his
or her teaching schedule, in order to set aside protected time for research.

- **Research Assistants:** If you feel that your research plan necessitates extra help, you should negotiate with the institution to get additional money for a research assistant. Keep in mind that if you take on a student assistant, you are probably expected to provide him or her with training and mentorship.

- **Computer Resources:** That can include a new computer as well as software necessary to do your research.

- **Travel and Conference Expenses:** Before accepting an offer, you should have a clear picture of the travel money that will be allotted to you -- many offers only cover the cost of one conference a year. If your work requires a more active travel schedule, try to negotiate for more travel aid.

- **Start Date:** It is possible to persuade an institution to allow you to begin work a semester or even a full year later than originally intended. That extra time might allow you to turn your dissertation into a book, complete a postdoc, or even start a family.

- **Moving Expenses/Housing Help:** Many colleges and universities provide such assistance automatically. Find out how much it will cost you to move and ask about the institution's policy if your new employer doesn't bring it up.

- **Job-Hunting for a Partner or Spouse:** Sometimes an institution is willing to help your partner or spouse with his or her job search. If your spouse is an academic, there is always the possibility of employment in the appropriate department. If your partner is not an academic and needs help searching for a position, an institution can often suggest resources for getting a job in the region and perhaps arrange a meeting between your spouse and a career counselor.

**Jenny:** When you're negotiating an offer, your goal is to provide logical, credible reasons to support your requests. If you feel the salary is low for the region or the institution, you should have done a bit of research to reinforce your claim. Similarly, when asking for things like additional research support or a reduced teaching load, you should argue that you are asking for those things because you would like to be the most productive faculty member possible.
Julie: Keep foremost in your mind that the people you are talking with are going to be your colleagues, people you will work with for possibly the next 30 years! So negotiate in a cordial, realistic manner that won't make them wish they had never offered you the job in the first place.

The ability to negotiate well is a skill that all academics need throughout their careers, especially if they take on administrative responsibilities. A job offer is your first opportunity to start honing that skill.

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