

Academic Job Offers & Negotiation

CAREER PLANNING SERIES

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Academic Job Offers and Negotiation

Following the campus visit, you know that you will either be offered the position or receive a rejection letter. You may suspect in advance that you will likely be offered the job—perhaps it was intimated during the on-campus interview that you were the favored candidate, or you’ve heard from your adviser that she was contacted as a reference. Sometimes a job offer will even come while you are still on campus for the interview. But most job offers come after the campus visit, and they are delivered verbally, through a phone call placed by the chair of the search committee.

When an offer is extended via telephone, it is common for the committee chair or dean to read the formal offer letter to you. Make a few notes and ask questions, but do not feel obligated to accept or decline the offer on the spot. Ask to have the offer letter mailed or faxed to you, and take time to carefully consider the offer. Request time to consider the offer: two weeks is typical, and most institutions will readily grant you that much time to make a decision.

When is an Offer an Offer?

Beware that a verbal promise of a job does not constitute a formal job offer. Many candidates have heard promises like “the job is yours,” only to have nothing materialize, often due to tough economic conditions for universities. Formal job offers are always made in writing, defining salary and terms of appointment. Wait until you have the written offer letter in your hands before making any other decisions. A written offer letter should detail the terms of the offer, which usually include salary, starting date, a summary of benefits, and any other pertinent information (such as release time, course teaching load, technical and research resources, etc).

Questions to Ask When Your Receive a Job Offer

After you receive a job offer, you will want to ask yourself several questions and weigh numerous pros and cons before accepting or declining.

Is the salary and benefits package fair?

Because of a varying cost of living across the country, you should make an effort to determine what is an appropriate entry-level salary in your field, not only on a national scale, but also on a regional scale. All salaries are public at public colleges and universities—inquire with the office of Human Resources at these institutions and others nearby. If the faculty at this institution is unionized, you may contact a union representative there to help review the fairness of your salary offer and contract. Generalized information about faculty salaries is released each year by the AAUP, available through the [Chronicle of Higher Education](#). Talking with peers in your discipline may also help.

Ask a few questions about the health care package being offered, such as: Do employees pay part of the insurance premium? When does health care take effect? Can health care coverage begin in the summer before the appointment starts? Does the plan cover your partner or dependents? Does the health care package include vision, dental, orthodontic, and psychological services? Also, how are retirement plans structured?

Many institutions provide perks to their employees, so you may want to learn more about benefits to you and your family. Does the university offer college tuition support for your children? Can you or your family members take classes at a discount? Does the institution have a fitness center for use by faculty and their families? Does the institution have child care services available to faculty and staff? What are the institution's family leave policies?

Are the terms of the appointment clearly defined?

Is your appointment defined as a 9-month or 12-month position? Is summer support separate from academic year salary? If so, is summer teaching available? Could research support for one or more summers be included as part of the start-up package? Can you have your 9-month salary distributed over a 12-month period?

If your appointment is split between departments or duties, is the division of responsibility well-defined, particularly related to matters such as teaching responsibilities, office location, performance evaluation, and home department for tenure review?

Is this institution and position a good "fit" for you?

Ask yourself how you see yourself in this environment. Do you think you can thrive and be happy at this institution? Does the department seem collegial? Will it be a positive work environment? Are you excited by the opportunity to work with the faculty members in the department and the students at the university?

Are the expectations for the position clearly defined and agreed upon by faculty and administrators?

What do your instincts tell you about the environment, per your campus visit and interviews?

What will your working conditions be like?

Is your course load clearly articulated and appropriate to the type of institution?

Be certain that all elements of your teaching responsibility are well defined: the number of classes each term, the number of new course preparations you will be responsible for in the first few years, the types of courses (graduate, undergraduate, nonmajors, etc.), support from teaching assistants, and typical enrollments.

Will you be provided an office, computer, clerical support, and all tools/resources necessary for your work?

Will you normally have summers off for your own research and writing?

Will you have the opportunity to teach in the summer for additional compensation?

Can you have a semester or two of leave during your first two or three years so you may focus on your research?

How are the library facilities? Will the department provide funding for the purchase of library materials relevant to your research?

Is your advising role defined? Are you expected to advise undergraduate honors theses, master's theses, and doctoral dissertations? How many?

How will your teaching be evaluated? Does the institution have resources to help you improve your teaching?

What is the path to tenure?

What is the process for tenure and promotion at this institution?

What are the standards the department would expect you to meet in order to recommend tenure? What are the publication requirements? Are these reasonable and well-defined in relation to the teaching load?

Have most recent hires achieved tenure, or have they left before achieving tenure? If so, what might this mean?

Does the department and/or university have a faculty mentoring program for young faculty members?

Is the institution making the commitment and investment in you to help see you to tenure?

What resources are available for your research? Are start-up funds available? Are they adequate to secure your successful path to tenure?

If you are a woman anticipating having children, you should ask questions about the tenure clock—does the tenure clock stop for a discrete period of time during pregnancy and childbirth?

Will you be able to have a life outside work?

Ask questions about local housing, public schools, and the community. Is this a community you will enjoy living in?

Is the cost of living prohibitive in the area?

If relevant, will your partner be able to secure satisfying work in the area?

Will your partner and/or children be happy in this community?

If the university has a spousal hiring program, can it perhaps identify suitable employment for your spouse?

What if this position is not your first choice?

If you receive an offer from an institution that is not your first choice, and you are hoping for good news from another university, request more time from the institution making an offer. While a two week period of time is standard, you can sometimes negotiate for more time. After you've received an offer, you may wish to telephone the institution(s) that you would most prefer to work at and explain that you have received an offer from another employer (without naming the specific institution). Sometimes the decision has been made but the paperwork is slow, and a phone call can help speed up the process and provide you with an answer more quickly. If the other institutions you are waiting to hear from cannot give you an answer in the timeframe you require, however, you may be forced to make a difficult decision.

When to Negotiate

After you have received a hard copy of the offer letter, you can begin negotiation. Negotiation is the process in which two parties decide upon the resources they will give and take in an exchange. Your goal in negotiation is to satisfy your preferences. However, for success, the tactics used must be collaborative and both parties should end negotiation feeling that they received something of value. According to Pinkley and Northcraft, only about 25 percent of job applicants attempt to negotiate. Women are often more reluctant to negotiate than men, and this disinclination accounts, in part, for continuing wage discrepancies between the sexes. However, virtually all employers agree that it is appropriate to negotiate as long as it is done professionally. Many organizations report that the first offer extended to an applicant is less than what they are willing to pay because they expect the applicant to negotiate.

Negotiate only after an institution has given you a formal job offer. At this point, you can be certain that they are fully invested in you and that they want you as a part of their department. The time between when you are given an offer and when you accept the offer is your prime window of opportunity for negotiation. At this point, many departments would prefer to satisfy your requests (provided they are reasonable), rather than reconvene to decide upon their next course of action—to present an offer to their second choice or begin a new search.

Negotiation Topics

Salary. Salary is the number one thing applicants negotiate, yet a negotiation that focuses only on salary will not be nearly as effective as one that considers all possible options.

Always ask if salary is negotiable. Many universities have a salary range for the position being offered, but offer letters usually will not offer a salary at the top of this range. As a result, it is often possible for the department to move a little bit within this range, especially if you are in a high demand field. Salary negotiation is very important because, for tenure track positions, most future salary raises are derived from your starting value. Salary increases are normally awarded annually, based on cost-of-living adjustments (and sometimes with small merit increases), and as a percentage of your salary, rather than a fixed dollar amount. Larger lump sum increases to your base pay do not occur unless you achieve tenure or commence another job search and receive an offer from another institution. The higher salary you start with, the more significant each salary increase will be. Because of equity issues relating to other assistant professors in a department, departments are often unable to accommodate a request for a slightly higher salary. In these instances, job seekers should focus their negotiations on other issues.

Moving expenses. Institutions may reimburse you for some or all of your moving expenses. Before negotiating, educate yourself about moving costs—either moving yourself or hiring a moving company. Having some idea of the costs will aid your negotiation. Save all receipts related to your move—your moving expenses may also be tax deductible.

Spousal or partner assistance can sometimes be requested, especially if the job being offered is in a remote location. This assistance can range from the institution providing the applicant's partner with resources for embarking on their own job hunt to actually locating a job for the spouse on campus. Generally a department will locate jobs only for the partners of highly recruited applicants, but if an applicant's partner is qualified for a campus position that becomes available, the partner candidate may receive some advantage. Investigate the programs available at the institutions you are considering. Spousal assistance initiatives are usually housed in the provost's office or academic affairs, and you may wish to do preliminary Internet research on the institution's Web site using the keywords "spousal hiring," "dual career" or "dual career academic couple." Representative programs exist at the [University of Michigan](#) and the [University of Illinois](#).

Benefits and health insurance. Benefits packages are often non-negotiable, as many universities have standardized (and comprehensive) benefits policies. However, take time to learn more about the benefits package being offered. You may have bargaining points, particularly if you have multiple offers.

Housing. Sometimes candidates can negotiate for the institution to pay for a second trip to the community to search for housing. Some institutions, especially those located in communities with a shortage of affordable housing, have on-campus facilities to temporarily house faculty or feature programs to help faculty members locate and purchase homes. You may wish to inquire about a campus's temporary housing provisions.

Start date. If you are ABD and working to complete your dissertation, you may consider

negotiating your start date. Sometimes you can delay the start date by a semester or two. If you begin work without your doctorate complete, clarify when the tenure clock officially begins.

Teaching load can sometimes be negotiated. You might discuss how many classes you will have to teach per semester, since a lighter teaching load will enable you to spend more time on research and writing, and possibly improve your prospects for tenure. Think in terms of both your teaching load and the number of class preparations you will have. You might also have some flexibility with your teaching schedule.

Start-up package. Research tools such as office space, laboratory facilities, computer(s) and software, secretarial or research assistant support, funds for research and conference travel, time off for research during the first year or two, sabbatical leave and funding for copies, books, and other materials can sometimes be negotiated.

Negotiation Strategies

Look before you leap. When you receive a job offer, ask for time to consider it and do not make an impulsive or hasty decision. Take time to decide whether you want to negotiate and develop your action plan before actually beginning the negotiation process.

Do some research. You will need information to decide how to conduct your negotiation, since having data to corroborate and justify your request is also important in establishing credibility. Public universities publish their salaries, so look at entry level salaries at these institutions to ensure that you are trying to negotiate within the appropriate ranges. Cost of living expenses are also very important to consider, since these greatly impact the value of the salary you are being offered. See www.homefair.com/homefair/calc/salcalc.html for estimates.

Be certain to also find out what benefits are automatically provided to you (such as travel funds or sabbatical leave) and what benefits might be fixed and non-negotiable (such as the health care and retirement benefits package) as an employee of the institution. Don't waste your time attempting to negotiate the latter.

Don't hesitate to ask! Many applicants are reluctant to even attempt negotiation. Some feel so grateful to have a job that they fear losing it, and others feel timid or guilty at the prospect of negotiation. Remember that you are not taking anything away from anyone else and that the department obviously really does want you (or else they would not have extended the offer in the first place). The worst answer you can receive during a negotiation is "no," and as long as you conduct yourself professionally, negotiating will not negatively impact your future with the department.

Negotiate professionally. You always want to be polite and professional in your negotiations, since the people with whom you negotiate may be your colleagues for a long time. It is preferable to negotiate verbally, either in person or on the phone, but if you are more comfortable, you might inquire about negotiation possibilities in writing.

Your tone must always be collegial and collaborative; you want the person you're negotiating with to understand that you are working with them to find the best possible solution. You never want to appear combative or hostile.

Don't fixate on one aspect of a negotiation. Many job applicants make the mistake of negotiating only for an increased salary. In reality, there are many other aspects of a job offer to negotiate, and while salary is the most obvious one, it might actually be the least successful. You may have much more room to negotiate for other terms, like office space, computer support, and leave time, and it's even possible that these aspects will make the job even more attractive than a slight increase in salary. Do not feel that your negotiation failed if the institution cannot increase your salary; sometimes it simply is not possible, especially if you are negotiating with a unionized campus or if budgets are tight. You must be willing to accept that the employer cannot honor your request.

Have negotiated terms put in writing. Following negotiation and the verbal agreement of terms, ask the employer to put these in writing. Review the revised terms carefully before accepting/declining the job offer.

Accepting and Rejecting Offers

Ultimately, you will have to either accept or reject every job offer that you receive. The best way to do this is to first call the department, since that will allow them to know of your answer in a timely manner, and then to follow up with a written letter of acceptance or rejection.

Acceptance

When you accept a job, be certain that your official letter of acceptance confirms all terms that were decided upon for the job, including start date and any negotiated benefits. If you have applications currently under review at other institutions, it is courteous to notify the search committees and withdraw your name from candidacy. If you have other pending job offers, you should certainly also notify those departments and reject them as soon as you accept your offer. You should begin to familiarize yourself with your new department, and it is never too early to start building relationships. This can be done by contacting some of your new colleagues and introducing yourself and learning as much about the new department as possible. Try to stay in touch with the department between the time of acceptance and your start date.

Rejection

Sometimes you will end up rejecting a job offer. This may occur for multiple reasons:

- You receive and accept another more attractive job offer.
- You accept a post-doctoral position instead.
- You realize that your dissertation will not be completed by the promised date.
- You realize that the position will not be a good fit for your skills, personality, and/or family.
- You cannot accept the terms of the offer.

- You are confident that you will receive an offer from an institution that is more attractive to you.

When you reject a job offer, be extremely polite and courteous. Notify them of your alternative plans and focus on the aspects of their department that were positive to you. It is important to conduct yourself professionally and leave a positive impression on the department; the academic community is relatively small, and you will likely encounter these committee members again.

Job Search Ethics—Can you Back Out on a Job Acceptance?

Sometimes a situation will arise where you accept a job offer, and then you are offered your “dream” job at another institution. Applicants often wonder if they can ethically break their commitment to the first institution and accept the position they really want. Some people will tell you that you are ethically obligated to meet the commitment you made to the first employer; others will say that you need to do what is best for you, your career, and your family. Ultimately it is your decision, and you must be comfortable with your decision and be prepared to live with the consequences. Backing out of a job you have accepted will likely not ingratiate you with members of the search committee, and it could have negative ramifications for your future career. Carefully consider your personal ethics and values, and perhaps get some advice from a faculty member whom you trust.

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