
THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

ADVICE

Go Ahead, Haggle

By Rebecca A. Bryant and Amber Marks | NOVEMBER 08, 2005

Fancy CV paper and six trips to Kinko's: \$124 Interview apparel: \$250 Choosing not to negotiate: \$150,000.

If you're like most academics, you either negotiate a job offer poorly, or you don't negotiate at all.

As graduate career counselors at a large research university, we work with numerous Ph.D.'s applying for academic jobs. Many of them know how to craft a persuasive cover letter and a compelling CV. They know how to prepare for an interview. But when the job offer comes, they are fairly clueless about what to do next, so clueless that they don't understand what they are sacrificing -- in money, time, and resources -- by failing to negotiate.

We think that new Ph.D.'s are reluctant to negotiate out of fear. At a recent workshop, one graduate student asked us: "If I try to negotiate, will they rescind my offer?"

In the tight academic job market, that might seem like a legitimate concern. But let us reassure you: Employers don't withdraw job offers because a candidate attempts to negotiate. In fact, most employers expect you to negotiate. The hiring process in academe is long, costly, and labor intensive. By the time a search committee makes an offer, it is eager to be done and to ensure that its time wasn't wasted. It's in the institution's interest, even in this market, to satisfy at least some of your requests.

The cost to you of failing to negotiate your first faculty position can be significant. Here's just one example: Miranda, a recent Ph.D. in the social sciences, negotiated a 6 percent increase in salary over what her new department initially offered her, from \$49,000 a year to \$52,000. If we assume she enjoys a 30-year career and receives annual raises of 3

percent, the extra salary that she negotiated would translate into an additional \$143,000 over what she would have earned without negotiating.

So, now that you know that you should negotiate, we're sure you're wondering how. Let's start with the questions we hear most often:

When do I negotiate? Wait until you have received an offer. If salary and "negotiables" (see below) are mentioned in your interview, try to refrain from accepting any set circumstances (perhaps inadvertently) at that time. Receiving a formal offer sets the stage for your negotiation process.

What do I do when the offer comes? Well, don't accept it immediately, even if it is your dream job with an unbelievable salary. Ask for the offer in writing and establish a mutually agreeable period for you to respond. Most students underestimate the time they will need to contact other institutions where they are on the shortlist and make a decision.

Once you have an offer letter in hand, examine it carefully to be sure you understand what you're getting and, in turn, what is expected of you. Will you have a nine-month appointment? Is the salary competitive? Is it a tenure-track position? Do you have access to detailed information on the benefits package? Must you reply by a certain date? When will you be expected to start? What will your teaching load be, and are there summer teaching obligations? If anything is vague or confusing, ask questions.

How do I prepare to negotiate? The first step is to gather as much information as possible. Fear of the unknown dissuades many students from trying. You can reduce your anxiety by following these tips:

- Put yourself in the institution's shoes. How large is your discipline? Is the department making the offer well-respected? Is the institution having any financial difficulties or undergoing any changes in administration? A recent Ph.D. in chemistry learned shortly after her interview that the university in question had received a generous private donation to renovate campus facilities. She kept that fact in mind when she negotiated for laboratory space and equipment for her research.

- Identify the possible objections and the questions the department might ask you in response to your counteroffer. One student was surprised when asked, "Why would you need a graduate assistant? You've managed without one until now." Think through the possible scenarios, and make notes for yourself.
- Spend time researching the salary and talking with your adviser and peers to get a sense of what seems reasonable in your discipline. State university salaries are often public record. Recognize that cost of living varies considerably and usually factors into salary negotiation.
- List your priorities. What is the bottom-line salary you would accept? What would be ideal? One recent graduate who got an offer from a university in a major city knew she could not afford to rent an apartment there and still pay off her student loans unless her position paid at least \$40,000. With \$50,000, however, she would be able to buy a home. Another Ph.D. worried that teaching summer courses would prevent him from completing his book and therefore jeopardize his chances of winning tenure. Ideally, he wanted a semester free from teaching obligations within his first two years.
- Contact institutions where you remain on the shortlist. Let them know you've received an offer and will need to make your decision in the weeks ahead. Inquire about the progress of their search, and with luck, they will be inclined to promptly indicate your status in their search.

What is negotiable? That depends on the limitations of the institution and on your own creativity. A social scientist living apart from her family for a year negotiated to have her Fridays free from teaching to allow her more frequent travel. For most new professors, though, the first and most obvious condition would be salary. Other possibilities include the deadline for your decision, moving expenses, benefits, job opportunities for your spouse or partner, housing arrangements, the start date, teaching load, teaching schedule, committee work, advising load, graduate-student assistance, laboratory or office start-up packages, summer commitments, conference and travel support, clerical and administrative support, and access to child-care and fitness facilities.

How do I negotiate? You have more leverage when you have more than one offer. However, if you've done your homework, you can negotiate quite successfully with just one. Depending on your situation, and the flexibility of the institution, some of the following strategies should help you negotiate:

- Consider the offer you have in hand, and others you may anticipate. Rank them. Realize that you can ask for more time. Ask for more time than you desire, and settle on something in the middle. Often, you will need additional time to be able to research your options and follow up with other institutions. Negotiate with your least desirable institution first. Once you've established the conditions under which you would join its team, contact your first choice and propose your counteroffer.
- Ask for more than you expect to receive. Be willing to consider a compromise in response to your counteroffer. A candidate in the life sciences requested two graduate assistants, imagining the research progress she could make with the added help. While she was only allotted one student for the first year, she knew even that would be beneficial.
- If you must, forego one-time expenses to net a greater salary increase. Even small increases in salary can add up over time. Remember, your starting salary affects your future salary. Many institutions have standard cost-of-living adjustments and few opportunities for significant increases. One-time expenses are much easier for an institution to offer than salary increases, though less advantageous for you. If you've aren't able to negotiate more salary, ask for conference travel, relocation support, or other short-term expenses.
- Determine your deal breakers. Be prepared to reject the offer if the terms are unacceptable to you. Think about how you would advise a friend or colleague in the same situation. We are often better advocates for others than we are for ourselves.
- Don't fixate on one aspect of the offer. We know of a humanities Ph.D. who needed \$5,000 more in salary and was willing to forego a relocation allotment. However, the university would only increase her starting salary by \$2,000. Instead, she sought additional start-up money for her office. Understand your priorities but be flexible

and open to compromise.

- Request the newly accepted terms in writing. If they are not in writing, they're not yours. Gary, an assistant professor at a major research institution, negotiated for a semester free from teaching to work on his research, but neglected to secure that promise in his offer letter. Two years later, he was frustrated when his request for a leave from teaching was denied.
- Above all, remain calm, professional, and honest. Whether or not you join the faculty, you are likely to interact with the people you've met at future events, conferences, or even job interviews.

Your institution wants you to be a permanent hire. It's your responsibility to ensure that you'll have the time, money, and support you need to develop your teaching skills, pursue your research, publish, and provide committee service. With preparation and practice, negotiation will become invaluable in other aspects of your life as well.

Remember, the worst they can say is no.

Rebecca Bryant is director and Amber Marks the assistant director of the Graduate College Career Services Office at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

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