

Tips for Negotiating a Job in Academia

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Tips for Negotiating a Job in Academia



Negotiation starts with your application; first goal is to make the top 10! Call attention only to your strengths and potential contributions. Don't mention any detractors.

- Upbeat cover letter. Don't mention anything that could detract from your application, e.g. "I want to continue my postdoc for another year", "my spouse needs a job", etc.
- Research statement needs to be somewhat specific to each institution and department to which you're applying. Do your homework. One goal is to identify potential collaborators, i.e. ALLIES who will support your application, but be realistic. Also, make sure it is clear that you have lots of research ideas of your own.
- Teaching statement also needs to be very specific to each institution. Review their curriculum, so that you do not propose to teach a "new" course that is already on the books. Provide a (1-page) description or even a syllabus for any new courses you envision. You could also mention a course(s) you could teach should the person normally teaching that course(s) go on sabbatical.

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Screening interview for top 5-10 candidates, often by phone/SKYPE, sometimes in an airport, or at a scientific meeting

- Keep in mind that you are probably not speaking with anyone having real authority, probably just a member (s) of the Search Committee. Answer the questions truthfully, but do NOT give out information that could limit your negotiating position with someone in authority that you meet later, e.g. no specific, detailed information on startup requirements, need for on spousal position, no personal information, no timetable, etc.
- You can stall or dodge a question you don't yet want to answer by saying something like, " I haven't yet had a chance to think carefully about XXXX, but will certainly do so should I move forward in the search process".
- Think beforehand of the messages that YOU want to convey about yourself and try to steer the conversation in that direction.

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Screening interview for top 5-10 candidates, cont.

- Revisit your CV, research and teaching statements. Point out any changes in status, e.g. new pubs, new grant, your meeting session was selected, etc. Emphasize what you contribute.
- Be prepared for some standard interview questions like: “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?”, “What do you consider your main strengths?”, “What do you consider your major successes and mistakes or failures?” In all cases, be sure your answers are directly related to the type of position for which you are being interviewed, i.e. don’t mix in personal goals even when they are very important to you. Don’t use the word failure, answer it as a “missed opportunity”. For example, “I got some interesting results when I blah, blah, blah, and wished that I had followed up by blah, blah, blah.....”

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On-site interview for top 2-3 candidates.

- When invited for an interview, make sure you ask to speak with faculty who you see as potential collaborators (i.e. you want allies!).
- You are still gathering information on this visit, and you do not want to reveal too many details on your needs and desires, EXCEPT to your future boss. In my opinion, you should speak openly about details to your future boss (e.g. Dept. Chair), but ONLY to your future boss. To others, it's fine to say something like "I need some time to digest the information I learned during the interview", as a way to politely dodge very specific questions, like how much startup do you need, salary requirements, etc.
- Try to speak one-on-one to recent hires about what they received as startup, starting salaries, space, teaching loads, teaching waivers, summer money, etc.
- Ask to speak with HR about benefits, but only speak to HR about benefits.

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On-site interview for top 2-3 candidates.

- Talk in general to your future boss about startup. That person should also give you some indication of salary. Don't ask them for it, if salary information is not offered. Don't accept a conditional salary offer ("if we offer you the job would you accept \$XXK/year?"). Know the institution's salary scale in advance of your visit.
- Respond to questions, but don't offer too much information on your needs/desires, except possibly to your future boss, e.g. don't offer that your spouse needs a job as well, but answer honestly if your future boss asks you this question. Politely dodge these types of questions if asked by someone else. You could say something like, "While I am visiting I plan to discuss my needs/situation with XXX (future boss, e.g. Dept Chair, Dean, etc.)."
- Don't waste time asking general questions about the tenure process. That is a formal, well-documented process probably available on the university webpage. Ask for the document. You don't want to seem too anxious, because it could give the impression that you lack confidence in your abilities.

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On-site interview for top 2-3 candidates.

Don't panic if you get asked an inappropriate question. This often happens at evening social events. ie. a spouse may ask if you have a family, or if you want children, etc. Often times these are innocent questions that seem obvious to older people to ask of younger people. The person may inquiring about children, for example, may want to make a point about the excellent school system to help sell you on the location. If you do not have children, a good answer might be "My spouse and I just haven't yet thought seriously about children".

I don't really know what advice to give should you be pregnant. Certainly don't volunteer this information to anyone (and no one should ask) , with the possible exception of your potential boss.

Talk to students. If not scheduled, ask for a meeting with only students. Get the student perspective on the department and on the faculty.

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You Got the Job Offer!

By now you should have a pretty good idea of the benefits, salary (most State universities publish their salaries), typical startup packages in the recent past, teaching loads, and whether other recent hires were offered student, postdoc or technical support.

You should be negotiating with your future boss, NOT the Search committee. A good “theme” to keep in mind as you negotiate is “I want to be successful in this job, and my success will also benefit my new institution”. With respect to salary, private institutions often have more flexibility than State universities, but everyone can move at least a little.

Some universities will send you a draft letter of offer for comment. Once you receive the final letter of offer, signed by a Dean or higher (Provost), it has the force of a contract. Pay attention to this draft letter!! If don't like or don't understand something in it, ask.

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Job Offer, cont.

Stuff you need to consider and resolve before accepting a job:

- Salary
- Nature of appointment – academic year? And if so, what are the options for summer salary?
- Start date. If you wish to finish your postdoc, ask if that is possible. But also worry a bit about future hiring freezes, department losing the position, etc.
- Benefits – this is probably standard for everyone so generally not much to negotiate. However, some institutions (mostly private) have a “signing bonus”.
- Moving costs and temporary housing? Financial assistance for buying a house?
- Laboratory startup funds, and you need to consider everything you will need to get started including supplies. In general, once you settle on an amount, it’s unlikely you’ll get more from the university, ever!

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Job Offer, cont.

- Access to special equipment (mass specs, etc.). Can you share? If so, what is your access? What is expected from you as a contribution.
- Lab and office space, and is it ready for occupancy? Think beyond immediate needs i.e. for future students and postdocs. Space is one of the most contentious issues on a university campus. Getting additional space will always be difficult.
- Teaching expectations and what about the first semester or year?
- Any funding for students, postdocs and/or technical assistance?
- Spouse job, and other more personal issues (you likely will not get anything in writing on these issues).

Good Luck!!

