

Meeting Reviews

Collected Thoughts on Negotiating for a Position in Academia

Conclusions from a discussion workshop at the 86th Annual Meeting of the Ecological Society of America, 5–10 August 2001, in Madison, Wisconsin.

You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometimes you may find, you get what you need.
—Mick Jagger and Keith Richards

At the 86th Annual Meeting of the Ecological Society of America, over 70 graduate students and post-docs joined five professors in a panel discussion of strategies in negotiating an academic position. The discussion, entitled “Dealing for your future: negotiating salary, start-up, and other essentials in academic hiring,” was sponsored by the ESA Student Section and organized by Debra Wohl and David Bowne. Techniques on how to interview and apply for an academic position are freely, if not easily, available. But strategic advice on how to behave once a position is offered is more difficult to find. We designed the discussion to address this deficiency. Judging from informal feedback from the participants, the discussion was a great success.

The panel consisted of three recently hired, tenure-track assistant professors and two professors with administrative experience, to provide insights from schools with a variety of sizes and missions. The assistant professors were Sharon Collinge from the University of Colorado, Nick Haddad from North Carolina State University, and Debra Wohl from the University of Richmond. Jeffrey Baylis, Chair and Professor in Zoology in the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin, and Ray Dueser, Associate Dean of the College of Natural Resources at

Utah State, rounded out the group with their administrative experience. Each panelist spoke for 10 minutes on his/her approach and experience in negotiating. After all panelists spoke, a question/answer period followed. Outlined below are some of the take-home messages.

1. Tone. It is essential to approach the negotiations with a congenial and enthusiastic attitude. Negotiations should not be confrontational—you are not bargaining for the best deal on a new car. Both parties have a vested interest in creating an atmosphere in which to succeed, and as such, you are all working for the same objective. Within that framework, you have to be realistic and know beforehand what you will need to achieve your goals. Remember that you want to be a good colleague.

2. Negotiating strength. We have all heard how tight the labor market is for tenure-track positions. In this light, it is easy to deceive yourself into thinking that you have a weak hand at the negotiating table. When you are made an offer, it means they want you. In this statement lies the strength of your negotiating position. Finding a qualified person who meets the needs and wants of a department is difficult, even with many applicants. The school has put a lot of time, energy, and money into searching for their ideal candidate, and they do not want to repeat the process. Do not be afraid of requesting more than they have offered for fear of having the offer revoked, but at the same time, be realistic and remember point 1. Deans often offer the maximum that they can, so do not be surprised if your requests are refused. However, there is no harm in asking. Just avoid serial requests and ones not directly related to the position.

3. Salary. Salary is obviously an important part of the job offer. Not

only does it affect your current earnings, but your future ones too. Raises are often made as a percentage of your starting salary. Although this is not always true, it is further incentive to obtain the best starting salary possible. A good place to get an idea of comparable starting salaries is the annual salary survey in the Chronicle of Higher Education. You can also obtain salary data on individuals at public institutions from the school itself, as these data are in the public domain. Another aspect of salary to consider is growth potential. Salary compression, the phenomenon in which junior faculty are hired at close to what senior faculty earn, is becoming increasingly common. This means that your salary may not have a lot of room to grow. Also remember to consider the length of the appointment (9 vs. 12 months), benefits, cost of living, and moving expenses into your calculation of what is an acceptable package.

4. Start-up. Start-up refers to resources that will be used to assist you in becoming established at an institution, and is often negotiable. It typically refers to money, but may also include laboratory space, staff support, travel funds, and allocation of your time. During the interview process, be sure to tour the departmental facilities to determine what equipment already exists in either your proposed space or as shared equipment. This will enable you to put together a detailed start-up package for that phone call from the dean. When calculating a dollar amount, also consider what are allowable purchases and the mission/size of the school. Can they afford you and your equipment? Can research start-up funds be used to purchase a field vehicle? If so, who pays for the gas and upkeep? Are you expected to use supplies bought for your research laboratory in a teaching laboratory? Can you fund a technician, field assistant, or graduate student? Is purchased equipment freely accessible

to all department members, or restricted in use? Who pays for equipment maintenance or shipping? Are costs of laboratory renovations deducted from start-up? Is laboratory space adequate for your needs? Considering these questions as you put together your start-up package demonstrates both your business savvy and attention to detail.

5. Spousal support. Many people had questions concerning the unique challenges inherent in finding jobs for both partners of an academic couple. Although this can be a contentious issue with no easy solution, particular behaviors are clearly counterproductive. The worst way to handle the situation is to spring a request for spousal support at the last minute. It can easily be a deal breaker. The issue should be addressed up front,

perhaps by first asking the search committee chair about the department and institution's policy on the subject. There are many options in dealing with it, including partial spousal salary, "sharing" a position, or hiring into an allied department. Of course, the institution may not be at all receptive to an academic couple. It is best to find that out early in the process. As with most things, communication is the key.

The topics in this short list were only the major points addressed in the brief time we had. Additional negotiable items that were discussed included teaching load, academic advising, department/institutional service, and committee duties. "The B & B primer on first job haggling" by Jack Bradbury, Jeffrey Baylis, Sandy Echternacht, and Chris Boake is a

great source of additional information on negotiation and can be easily downloaded from the Internet <<http://online.anu.edu.au/bozo/scott/jobhaggling.html>>. Regardless of the particular item, the most important thing is to know what you want and be up front and honest in trying to obtain it.

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