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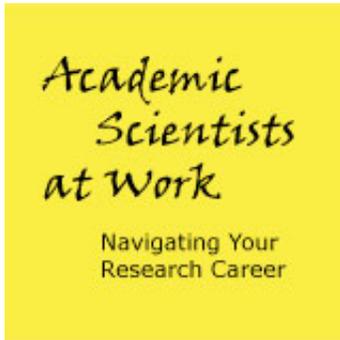
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## Academic Scientists at Work: Negotiating a Faculty Position



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The first and most important key to any negotiation is to know your bottom line.

### Greedy Gus: Negotiating an Assistant Professorship

"Can you believe it? Dr. Gus, the immunology faculty candidate with the curly red hair, has asked for season's tickets for the Braves in his start-up package," the chair of the new assistant professor search committee announces at the faculty meeting. "I heard that he is using our offer to up the ante at South-by-Southeast U, responds Dr. B. Leaveitornot," to which the department chair quickly responds, "I don't know or care about South-by-Southeast. We are a better fit for his research program, our offer is very generous, and after three rounds of discussion and visits he can take what we offer or not. I will give him until next Thursday." Assuming that Gus really wanted to work at Firstchoice University, instead of South-by-Southeast, he may have blown the deal.

Negotiating a job is similar to playing a hand of poker: the stronger your hand, your credentials, the more you can demand. The trick is to know what aspects of the position are negotiable and what the limits are; otherwise, you may find that the offer has folded. This article will discuss the issues at stake in academic science research positions and offer some suggestions on how you could approach your own negotiations so that you get the job you want and the start-up package you need.

The first and most important key to any negotiation is to know your bottom line. Your prospective employer, the Department Chair, knows *her* bottom line, because she has limited resources and space. That puts you at a disadvantage, unless you know yours as well. To figure out what *your* bottom line is you must first answer these critical questions:

- How good a fit is the department for my research program?
- What size lab do I need?
- How much "start-up" money do I need to establish my research program?
- How much time am I willing to devote to teaching?
- How much time can I afford to devote for service-oriented duties?

The first question asks you to decide whether this would be a good department for you and therefore how many other things you are willing to sacrifice in order to end up there. If it's not a good fit, then you have two choices: 1) try to negotiate some aspect of the offer that will make the position more attractive, or 2) look elsewhere.

If this department is your first choice, then you don't want to blow the deal so you will need to be careful to ask only for what you really need to be successful. You may consider asking for things that are not essential for success but would make life better. However, you may have to pass on some of these during your negotiations. At least you know what items/issues you will fold your hand on. As you negotiate, tally your points. As a rule of thumb you can expect to win roughly four *important* points of negotiation in your final offer. There is no exact number, but no one likes a Greedy Gus, so choose wisely. Only negotiate hard for the things you know you really need.

If the department is not ideal but has some aspects that would make it a good place to work, you can probably afford to push harder for items and issues that would make the position better. Such items may include special equipment that you normally would share, slightly larger space, larger start-up funds, reduced teaching, bigger computer monitor, and others. If you really don't want the job, politely say so and move on. It really is not worth the headache and your time to negotiate for a position you do not want.

### **Start up**

Let's assume the department is a good fit. What's involved in negotiating the start-up package? The package will include space (laboratory and office) and money for staff, equipment, and reagents. Each of these is drawn from a separate pot, so you need to evaluate each of them separately.

### ***Space***

Space is always a limited resource. Junior faculty are often assigned a minimal amount of space—ranging on average from, say, 400 to around 1000 square feet. The research techniques you will use and the equipment you need will determine how much space—the absolute minimum—that you have to have. For modern molecular/cellular biology research, a well-laid-out 400 square foot lab can hold 2-3 full time staff and some equipment, but will be tight if some of the equipment is large. Some 600 square feet can house 3-4 staffers and hold a reasonable amount of equipment.

Though it really does depend on your particular needs, 1000 square feet is a large lab. A lab of this size can fully support at least 5-6 full-time staff members and lots of large equipment. It takes at least one if not multiple grants to financially support 5-6 full-time staff. So, as a rule of thumb, every lab employee needs about 150-200 square feet of lab space, equipment included. But it's only a rule of thumb.

So, depending on what kind of work you intend to do, a large lab may not be essential. Still, you need to be sure that you have the space you need as you expand your resources and your scientific family. In contrast to single-investigator laboratories, the recently popular large, multiple-investigator joint labs have built-in mechanisms to grow and contract with funding and rank (see [Space Odyssey](#) by Lila Guterman in the 10 December 2004 issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, subscription required). If the space offered is not sufficient to allow you to succeed, then you must justify why you need more: the equipment won't fit, or a separate room is needed for your ebolavirus work, surgery, PCR, and so on.

The condition of the space and the layout is also important. Sometimes, the space may need to be renovated to your needs. A careful renovation can help mitigate a space issue, but renovations are expensive and may eat into your package. If the space needs renovating and

your start up funds have to pay for it, be sure there's enough money in the startup package to get it done.

If you choose to negotiate over space, this will count as your first important negotiating point. If you win what you want, that's one important victory. Then again, if the space is unacceptable, and no amount of renovation can save it or if the money for renovation isn't there then this position requires no more consideration. Negotiations over!

### ***Funds***

The next most important point of negotiation is the start-up funding package. The good news is that start up packages have risen dramatically over the last 10 years, mostly due to competition among research-oriented institutions trying to hire the most promising young faculty. Depending on how your prospective chair likes to do business, your start-up package may be offered as a lump sum or as a tally of individual items such as equipment, staff, reagents and so on. Regardless of whether you are faced with lump-sum negotiations or individual categories, you will have to add up all your anticipated costs and be prepared to negotiate for more if the sum offered is insufficient. Yes: this means you need to have a very clear idea of what you need and how much it costs before entering the negotiations.

As you think about negotiating start-up funds, it is important to remember that these funds are to provide you with what you need to initiate your career, not to maintain it. You will be expected to pay for all your research costs from your extramural grants as soon as possible; still, you should make sure the start-up money is sufficient to pay all your expenses until you've had a chance to establish another revenue stream.

*Equipment:* Equipment is a special category because it is a one-time cost, and the department/institute owns it. Some of it may even be shared by other scientists. Because she knows the ropes and your work, an experienced chair is likely to have a pretty good idea of how much the equipment you need will cost. Very likely, the search committee discussed it with the chair before making you an offer.

You need to be aware of the costs too. So walk around your current lab and tally up the costs for the items that you need all the time, those that you can share (if they are readily available), and those you need only every once in a while. The first two categories, added together, will probably run about \$100-\$150K for a molecular/cellular lab. For scientists working in other fields, the number will range from lower to quite a bit higher. You may be able to win yourself some wiggle room by including in this tally equipment that is already available in your prospective department that you are willing to share. Because they don't have to know this, it allows you to concede other items.

Some very expensive equipment may require a separate negotiation, because it is out of the range of what most departments are able to offer as part of a startup package. In some cases, funds for such expensive equipment items, especially equipment not in the department or building, can be obtained separately from a special pot of resources.

While funds for expensive equipment may be easier to negotiate for at large research universities or research medical centers, smaller less research-intensive institutions may qualify for grant programs that can provide extraordinary resources. Regardless of the source, the chair may have to negotiate something with her dean. If you ask for and receive a special dispensation for expensive equipment, then this may be win number two.

*Staff:* Because staff costs are recurring, they are often the most difficult to negotiate. Depending on the size of the institution, it is expected that junior faculty will establish a laboratory of as many as 2-3 full time members during the first three years. This group usually will consist of a technician and one to two graduate students. A mid-level tech and

one graduate student will cost \$65-\$75K per year (depending on salaries, fringe benefits, and stipends). Tuition costs, if you are required to pay them, can increase the amount you need by another \$20-30K per year.

The negotiating points here are for additional staff like a very talented postdoc and the number of years of support. Because recurring funds come from different fiscal-year budgets, you may be able to negotiate for an additional person in year two. Your chair, however, may expect you to have extramural funds to pay for them by year 2. Nonetheless, if you want a larger group, you may want to consider this topic as one of your main points.

*Reagents:* The costs of reagents are always difficult to predict. One way is to assume that each full-time staff member spends about \$15-\$25K per year depending on his or her need for animals and high cost specialty reagents such as antibodies and radioactivity. Don't forget to count yourself as full-time staff. It is expected and wise for you to conduct your own experiments and not place your career in the hands of others until you are established. It's easy to justify the above numbers, but if you need more than \$25K per person per year, and the budget offered is insufficient, then you will need to state why.

*Length of time:* The number of years of support for your fledgling group becomes critical as federal budgets become tighter. Because your first grant application may not be funded on the first or second submission, and because you will need preliminary data to support your aims, several years of support is required. Negotiating for three years of support for a tech and a student with supplies is common but some institutions/departments just can't afford to offer staff salary several year's out. This point may be worth pushing hard on, for win number three or four.

Sometimes start-up monies are linked to a fiscal year or a special account. While you may not care about the source, there may be a time limit on the funds, or the chair may impose one if she believes that the monies should be spent to jump-start your lab. Knowing the answer to the question will help you decide if you need to negotiate this point. You will also need to know what happens if you get funded before your start-up runs out. Will the department cut off your unspent start-up funds if you don't "need" the money anymore after your grant starts? It would be a shame to lose the money if you were brilliantly successful and got your grant within the first few months. This is not a difficult point of negotiation but one that should be explained in the start-up package.

### **Teaching Responsibilities**

You need to know how you feel about teaching when you are considering an offer. Almost all junior faculty are expected to contribute to the teaching mission of the department (see our earlier article "[To Teach or Not to Teach](#)"). The questions are how much, and when. If the job is in an undergraduate department, you can expect to teach a minimum of a course/ year, more likely one each semester, possibly more. If you are also expected to establish a strong research lab, then you need to delay the full teaching load for as long as possible.

Most new faculty can get a 1-year delay in their teaching load. If you would like a longer delay, put this closer to the top of your list of points worth fighting for. Medical school departments team-teach most of their courses, so the teaching burden is usually greatly reduced. However, it may require a lot more work on your part to teach a lecture about fungal infections to second year medical students, if you not sure what causes athlete's foot and you were assigned the task because you work with *S. cerevisiae*. Regardless of the department it is important that your teaching responsibilities are clearly spelled out and that you are satisfied with the arrangement.

### **Service Responsibilities**

Committee work. Advising students. Administering graduate programs. Running a core

facility. Seeing patients. Service to your department and institution comes in many forms. Some of these responsibilities, such as seeing patients, may be directly linked to your salary, or to the ability of the department to pay your salary. If you are seeking such a position, then this is a critical point of negotiation. For example, [physician scientists](#) have the difficult task of balancing their research time with their clinical time. If they are spending 50-60% of their week seeing patients, it will be nearly impossible for them to start up a successful research lab in a reasonable period of time. Conversely, if they do not see patients for an extended period, they will not be very good physicians. Many physician scientists try to work out a split of their time so that they are spending 70-80% of it on research (or 1-1.5 days a week in the clinic).

If you are running a service core of some kind that is unrelated to your research, then a similar split may be appropriate for you as well. Naturally, this split time is a point of negotiation. Additionally, you may also negotiate a delay in the time before you carry out your full service obligations. Of course, if the department is hiring you to fill a specific service obligation, this will not be negotiable, but you will know this from the start.

### **Salary**

Everyone wants the biggest salary. Salary funding is complicated by the fact that it is derived from university funds, research grants, and sometimes from clinical service. Some of the parameters that govern salary include type of institution and department (medical school, undergraduate college); your degree (PhD, MD); cost of living in the region; what others at your rank and experience earn at this institution as well as "peer" institutions; among others. Even though you and your salary are a recurring cost to the department, there is room to negotiate here, too. You will need to know the basis of what others earn to negotiate this point.

If it is a medical school, the AAMC publishes a book each year [Report on Medical School Faculty Salaries](#) comparing salaries in all the types of schools, departments, and faculty ranks. This very thorough salary survey is a good resource for researching the salary ranges in American medical schools. *Science* also has conducted [surveys and reports](#). Professional societies in other fields also publish salary surveys. You will also know from your other interviews and offers what the current range is.

With this in mind, unless you live beyond your means or the salary offered is too low to support your family, salary should not have a direct impact on your ability to succeed. The take home message here is to negotiate for what you need and what is a fair wage for the department, position, and region of the country. All this info should help you make a reasonable counter offer for salary if you deem it to be a point worth fighting for.

Along with salary is the issue of salary recovery (see [Giving it 110%](#)). How much of your salary do you have to pay from your research grants, and when will this begin? If you are expected to garner extramural research funds, then it is likely that you will be expected to eventually pay some percentage if not 50% or more of your salary from grants or other outside resources. This practice varies from field to field, and seems to be less common in the physical sciences.

While there is probably a department standard for salary recovery, it should not apply to you right away because you will be starting out as a junior faculty member. You may be able to negotiate a delay as to when salary recovery will start or even negotiate the expected amount that you will recover by some specified point. Alternatively, you may be able to negotiate additional funds for your lab if you can recover the department's standard sooner than a specific time. This would be the case if you were able to bring your own grant with you when you start the position.

## Get it in Writing

It is important to get your offer in writing, signed by the chair. No exceptions! Make sure the letter says what is included and how long you will have access to the funds. If a lump-sum number is cited, ask to have the categories that you can spend the money on listed; i.e., staff, supplies, equipment, travels, and so on. It may seem a little awkward at first asking your future employer for something in writing, but get over it: Any experienced department chair will respect your efforts to have things well documented.

## Summary

Everyone has a different set of points that are important for his or her happiness and success. The above discussion left out many minor points that will come up although they may not be minor to you! In preparing for your negotiations, rank your points as: must have, would like to have, and can live without. This will determine which points you argue over and which ones you concede. Remember, this is a business deal and try to stay focused on the issues you want. It is likely that you will go back and forth a number of times until you have what you need. Be patient. You were the department's choice and the chair also wants you to succeed and will do what she can to give you what she has to offer. In the end you will most likely receive a fair package that will allow you to develop your career.

Good luck and happy negotiating!

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## The editors suggest these related resources at Nextwave:

- **Be Honorable and Strategic**  
Chris Golde, 24 August 2001, UNITED STATES

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