

Graduate School

Guide to Negotiating an Academic Job Offer

Negotiating your academic offer can be nerve-wracking, and that concern usually revolves around a single question: what if the committee rescinds the offer?

That almost never happens.

Only 2% of academic offers are rescinded—and you can be on the lookout for the red flags indicating a department that might rescind an offer. If the school is very small, rural, and Christian or formerly a Christian college, the data show they are more likely to rescind an offer—but this is still not very likely! Likewise if the teaching load is very high, the chair or dean appears cold or rigid, or the deadline for response is very tight, they may be more likely to rescind the offer. If none of those are the case, the chance of having an offer rescinded is significantly reduced.

It is normal and expected for you to negotiate, and you can expect to receive some of the items you are negotiating for. You should prepare for your negotiation by knowing what makes up a total compensation package that will allow you to succeed, and then by doing your research and practicing your points with a friend or colleague, if necessary. Part of this preparation includes identifying your dealbreakers early on; what elements of your total compensation package are necessary for your success in the role? Which items would—if not agreed to—cause you to walk away from the offer? You need to know—and not reveal!—your dealbreakers so that you know where to focus your efforts, and where you can afford to concede a point.

Salary is typically the place to start. Salary builds over time, and if you leave money on the table, your percentage-based merit raises will suffer, because they will be lower than they could be. It is also still common for future salary to be based on salary history (this may be illegal in your state—check!), so the decision to accept a low salary offer early in your career can follow you for years, even to a new institution.

For all these reasons, your first efforts should be focused on salary, but other areas that you can negotiate include teaching load, teaching releases, start-up funds, perhaps a junior sabbatical to help you achieve publication goals for tenure, research funding, conference or travel funding, funding for your graduate students, summer funding or a summer bonus, a paid house-hunting visit, space provisions, delayed start, immediate health insurance coverage, a spousal hire, and more.

Remember that at larger, richer, more influential institutions, you can and should expect a better

offer than at a small regional college with less money and fewer resources. Don't try to negotiate R1 benefits at a small regional PTI—but also, don't accept a small regional college offer from an R1.

Questions you might ask yourself are: what is a normal range of direct compensation for this post? What will my moving costs be? What are housing costs like in the new city? Does the university offer a housing allowance or housing assistance for new hires, and how much? If you are going to need research funding, what are the typical start-up costs for a post like this in your field, and how long do you need this start-up funding to continue (how long will it take you to identify other sources of funding and then apply for and receive these funds)?

The answers to these questions will help you assemble your desired package, which you can then check against the total compensation package you are being offered, and identify key areas for negotiation.

When you negotiate, it's important to remember that this is business, and should be phrased and framed as such. It often seems less aggressive or offensive to the listener to couch a counter-offer in language that stresses your feelings or comfort, but that softening effect can undermine your business case. Offer business reasons for the counter-offer, such as the prevailing compensation for similar positions, your unusual skills or abilities, or the importance of the item under discussion to your ability to succeed in the role. Everyone here wants you to succeed. Negotiation is the process of you and the department working in partnership to make sure you will have what you need to succeed.

Tips:

- Always negotiate in good faith.
- Be appreciative and humble even as you are aware of your value and firm about your needs.
- Open and close each conversation with appreciation and enthusiasm.
- Send (or ask for) follow-up emails after verbal conversations that summarize the discussion and indicate any conclusions reached.
- Be clear with yourself about the difference between things you need and things you want, and be willing to compromise on the latter while standing firm on the former.
- Work to find the win-win solutions.

If you do your research, know your dealbreakers and must-haves, and are prepared to make a business case for your compensation package, you will succeed in your academic job offer negotiation.

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