Career Advice

Negotiate Like a Professor

March 14, 2011

By **Adam Fulton**

For many academics, their first full-time teaching position is, in fact, their first significant employment of any sort. My own illustrious record of employment — besides teaching assistant and adjunct — before accepting a tenure-track teaching position consisted of babysitter, newspaper boy, and summer camp counselor. Since many other academics may have similar work histories, they will no doubt be caught unaware when negotiating their first full-time position. In light of some of my own blunders when it came to negotiation time, I thought it would be helpful to those currently on the job market to offer the following rules to negotiating like a pro.

Rule #1: You can't serve two masters.

Ideas are pure; money is dirty. You can't be equally committed to both of these opposing motives, at least not at the exact same time. Although colleges and universities are ultimately businesses and you are certainly not offering your services to them out of the goodness of your heart, you must first and foremost foreground your unwavering commitment to the unadulterated pursuit of knowledge. In light of this, you should avoid at all costs any discussion with the search committee of anything having to do with workload, benefits, research funds, and, most importantly, financial compensation before you have actually been offered a position. (A key exception to this rule will follow.)

Rule #2: Sometimes you are forced to talk turkey.

A search committee may want to discuss benefits and compensation as either a way of wooing potential candidates or as a means of weeding them out by assessing if candidates' expectations exceed what the institution can offer. Even if an interviewee should always mirror the interviewer, one must keep Rule #1 in mind if the committee forces the issue. Always listen attentively to anything an interviewer wants to tell you, but emphasize at this point that you aren't overly concerned with these sorts of issues. Never come across in an interview as if you are interviewing the search committee. Most important, you want to avoid the pitfall of showing any sense of discontent with anything related to expectations or compensation: teaching load, travel money, research funds, parking places, or the occasional free meal in the cafeteria. (Positions in science at research universities are the exception here that proves the rule. For those jobs, it is expected that a candidate would be prepared with a list of necessary laboratory equipment, facilities, staffing and outside funding prospects.) Do your homework before any interview so that you already have some general idea of what the college provides and so that you won't be caught off-guard when you are told that you will be teaching more classes then you expected and be paid half as much as you had imagined.

Rule #3: Never act desperate when you're trying to get a date.

Although we're all looking for our soul mates, there's no bigger turn-off than someone who is too desperately looking for love. Many candidates avoid the tendency of being too aggressive and instead falter by being so desperate for the job that they praise the merits of the college they are interviewing with as if Podunk U. were Plato's Academy. Search committees are instantly turned off by this sort of rhetoric. Highlight your own credentials in your job letters and on your interviews, and let the love between you and them happen

organically.

Rule #4: You can still play hard to get (to a degree).

Nothing in your life up to this point may be as exciting as getting a call from a dean with a job offer. Even if it feels that all your prayers have been answered with this beckoning from the ivory tower, you must resist the temptation to drop your academic stoicism in a display of unbridled emotion. Even when everything feels right, you want to avoid deciding something as important as a marriage with a shotgun wedding in a Las Vegas drive-through chapel. Be prepared when that call comes through to express a measured sense of interest and excitement about the position while conveying that you need some time to think through the offer. Even if you have just been offered the position of your dreams, never accept a job offer outright; after all, even a position at Harvard or Cornell has its drawbacks when you consider the bone-chilling winters that you will have to endure. Don't feel like the job will miraculously disappear if you don't sign a contract the same day the job is offered. Although there are many notorious stories of job offers being pulled due to budget cuts even after contracts have been signed, your need for some time to consider the offer will not affect the metaphysical being of the job's existence. Even if having something in writing doesn't count for much in the academic world, do ask the person making you the offer for an e-mail detailing all of the compensation details that you have discussed in your phone conversation.

While you may be thinking about trying to play really hard to get by stalling for several weeks in order to hear back from all your outstanding job applications on the chance that you get a better offer, no employer is going to allow this -- as forestalling the search on their side threatens their ability to fill the position with a qualified candidate. A week seems like the maximum time that is appropriate to ask for in your deliberation and even this may be your first issue that is deliberated.

Rule #5: Lose the point and win the game.

Although the ball may be in your court when you get a job offer, that doesn't mean you'll win the game. Don't all of a sudden adopt an aggressive approach with the assumption that you've got them where you want them. First off, you only really have bargaining power if you have two competing offers and can use this as some sort of leverage. Even if you are in the admirable position of having multiple offers, don't overestimate your bargaining power. More than anything, I would think that multiple offers simply allows you to be more genuine when expressing that you are legitimately deliberating rather than simply bargaining. This enviable position also allows the offers to do the bargaining for you. Rather than placing your list of demands without anything to back them up, you need simply share the competing offers with the other institutions, and let this speak for itself.

If you don't have multiple job offers, and if you are in a field where those hiring know that you are fortunate to have an offer, that doesn't mean you have to be a pushover, but it probably means that the search committee knows that there are a dozen folks like you ready to take the job if you turn it down.

Whether or not you have multiple offers, you don't want to come off too aggressive when negotiating. Although you are in negotiating time, you should always remember that at this point forward you are playing for the bigger game of getting tenure. There are valid issues to negotiate when you have been made a job offer, but don't win the point and lose the game by starting your career with the reputation of being a difficult colleague who doesn't play with the team in mind.

Rule #6: Learn what's fair game.

Even in the ruthless business world, the common advice about negotiating suggests that one should begin one's negotiations by expressing one's excitement about the position and one's hopes that you will be able to come to an agreement that works for both parties. Moreover, the accepted rhetorical style is to phrase all request in the form of polite questions: "I was wondering if you'd be able to come up to this salary."

So, now that you are in negotiation time, what's fair game? First off, the initial offer you receive will not be far off from what you will ultimately sign off on. That said, seemingly little victories in the negotiation process add up to huge gains when considered over a career. The key is, therefore, to make reasonable demands that are on par with others in the same field at the particular college and at peer institutions. These may include requests for higher salary, research support, graduate assistants, and a course load reduction in the first year, as well as any one-time expenses such as to cover equipment, software, and moving expenses.

If you are in the unenviable position of being a part of an academic relationship, now would also be the appropriate time to inquire about any job opportunities for your partner that might be available. Although spousal hires are more difficult to come by now, given

the current economic climate, institutions are still sensitive to the inevitable hardships caused by dual academic relationships and thus may be able to provide a partner with an instructor position or, if nothing else, adjunct work. This may not seem ideal, and it can be difficult (but not impossible) to move from these slots into tenure-track positions that emerge later. But this is a fair issue for you to put forward.

Rule #7: Determine with care how much is too much.

Even though most universities have been experiencing budget cutbacks, the dean will still allow for some wiggle room when making a job offer, and you should, by all means, try to wiggle as far as you can. Even before you start your job search, you should be aware of the average salaries within your discipline for your respective rank. Always be careful when doing this research to find the most appropriate data. My own blunder was to find the salary breakdowns from the American Association of University Professors for the university that was making me an offer; the problem was that this data averages together salary figures from all disciplines across my university. I was thus shocked when the offer from the dean was more than $30,000 below the average salary for an assistant professor at my school! Thinking I was then going to play hardball with this information in hand and demand a significantly higher salary that was commensurate with my colleagues, the dean quickly informed me that this data is skewed on account of the six-figure salaries of the business faculty.

Avoid making this sort of blunder by obtaining salary data for recent hires in your discipline at the college that is hiring you (at many state universities this is public information). This will give you the most realistic information of how high the dean will be able to go. Additionally, you should seek out similar data from peer institutions located in the same geographic area. This information might give you leverage to push the dean higher by making a case that the institution is out of sync with its peer institutions. I would suggest that your request not go beyond about 6 percent of the original offer. Armed with my skewed dated in hand, I naively asked the dean for a salary increase of 50 percent and was ultimately content to have received a 1.25 percent increase on the original offer. Again, all of these requests should be done in the most politic manner as you take away any small victories and start playing for tenure.

Adam Fulton is the pseudonym of an associate professor in the humanities at a state university in the South. He doesn't want a future employer to know his thoughts about these kinds of negotiations.