Science Societies

Negotiations in public universities

A guide for early career scientists and engineers

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In this month's column, we explore the nuances of negotiations in public universities and provide advice to early career scientists and engineers who are pursuing a faculty position. Our aim is to help empower readers to approach negotiations with confidence and clarity to set both institutions and candidates up for long-term success.

Let us begin by reflecting on how frequent negotiations occur in your daily life. Think back over the past year and try to count the number of instances where you had to negotiate something. It could be as infrequent as once or as often as a thousand times. While this exercise may seem exaggerated, negotiation is far more common than most of us realize. People often associate negotiation with high-stakes scenarios, such as securing a job offer or requesting dual-career hires, but negotiation happens constantly in more subtle ways. For instance, responding to peer reviewers' comments on a manuscript, deciding class schedules for a graduate student, or collaborating on a budget for a grant proposal all involve negotiation. Even casual decisions, such as choosing where to dine with a partner, are examples of negotiation.

Negotiations in life occur in many forms such as fleeting interactions like deciding on an impromptu handshake with a colleague while rushing off to another meeting or drawn-out processes such as finalizing a start-up package contract. Across all stages of a career, negotiation skills are indispensable. Successfully navigating negotiations can set the tone for relationships with colleagues, secure resources for your work, and establish a foundation for long-term professional growth. And while negotiation might feel daunting, the good news is that it is a skill you can refine with practice and reflection. So let us dive right in!



Even casual decisions, such as choosing where to dine with a partner, are examples of negotiation. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/Lumos sp.

Setting the stage for long-term success

Negotiating a faculty position at a public university is a rare opportunity, in which the outcome will impact you and your family for years to come. Whether concerning dual-career hiring, salary, or research/teaching resources, the terms you negotiate establish the scale and perimeters for launching a successful program (and personal life) over the long-term. Although the prospect of this task may feel daunting, you can rest assured that this is not a task you have to tackle alone. After all, negotiation involves at least two, and if the department or college you have applied to is set up to make great advances, then they have administrators whose entire goal is to have their personnel thrive. These administrators understand their most valuable resource for stakeholder impact is their personnel and the work environment they operate in. Moreover, those

administrators are thoughtful in making clear and reasonable accommodations to candidates' needs.

It may come as a surprise to you, but administrators expect you to negotiate as this is the most direct means for them to learn precisely what resources will make you and your program thrive. The best thing you can do is to be honest with them (and yourself) about the real needs of your work and for you and your family. Although some people's idiosyncrasies may make you question their genuineness towards your success, just remember that they want to hire you (and thus interact with you) for the next several decades. If they are not invested in your success, then there are institutional problems beyond the scope of what you should worry about fixing. If your instincts tell you that something is institutionally wrong, then you should pause and give yourself a moment to clearly think about whether moving forward or not with further negotiations is in everyone's best interest.

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Practical advice

Now let us focus on preparing for negotiations. It is helpful to create a prioritized checklist of items to address. Preparing for negotiations as a research faculty member requires a clear understanding of the resources and support necessary to establish and sustain a successful research program.

Start by evaluating your prospective lab or computational space, ensuring it not only meets your immediate needs, but also accommodates future expansion. Consider whether the space includes access to utilities (including deionized water), specialized infrastructure, or proximity to necessary equipment. If your research involves shared facilities, clarify the terms of access, including whether usage fees will be covered or reduced.

Equipment and materials funding is critical for launching a research program. Be specific about the equipment and materials required and confirm whether these will be covered under your start-up package. Be open to whether there are shared resources you can leverage rather than duplicating equipment or facilities; after all, you will need to maintain and service the equipment that you end up purchasing, which may cause undue burden if those same resources are already available.



When negotiating a faculty position, start by evaluating your prospective lab or computational space, ensuring it not only meets your immediate needs, but also accommodates future expansion. Photos courtesy of Adobe Stock/shock and luchschenF.

Personnel support is essential for a strong research program. Request funding for graduate students, postdocs, or lab technicians and verify whether there is an option to renew these positions after the initial start-up period.

Finally, consider the broader support available for your work. If your research involves fieldwork, then discuss funding for travel, logistical expenses, safety equipment, and the availability of dedicated or shared vehicles. For computational research, ensure access to high-performance computing resources, software licenses, and data storage solutions. Additionally, seek professional development opportunities, such as funding to attend conferences or workshops where you can network, present findings, and explore potential collaborations.



If your research involves fieldwork, then discuss funding for travel, logistical expenses, safety equipment, and the availability of dedicated or shared vehicles. Photo by Perejitei Bekewe.

By prioritizing these areas, research faculty can negotiate a package that sets a solid foundation for long-term success.

When preparing for negotiations as a teaching faculty member, it is important to focus on items that directly impact your ability to deliver high quality instruction while balancing your workload. Discuss the number and type of courses you are expected to teach each semester. If possible, negotiate for a reduced teaching load during your first few years to allow time for both curriculum and professional development. Ensure clarity on expectations for large lecture courses versus smaller, specialized classes as these differences can significantly affect your workload. Request funding or support for instructional materials, software licenses, or technology upgrades that align with your teaching responsibilities. Explore opportunities for professional development,

such as attending pedagogy workshops or conferences focused on innovative teaching practices and ask whether travel support for these activities is included in your package. Additionally, if teaching assistants or graders are provided, confirm their availability and the extent of their responsibilities to ensure adequate support for your courses. Finally, consider negotiating for flexibility in your teaching schedule to accommodate other professional commitments or personal needs.

Extension faculty roles often emphasize outreach, education, and community engagement, which means your negotiation priorities should reflect the unique demands of these responsibilities. Start by clarifying the scope of your extension activities. Will you be expected to deliver workshops, develop community programs, or create educational materials? Ensure that your workload is balanced and achievable, particularly in terms of travel expectations for community outreach. Negotiate for resources that will directly support your extension efforts, such as funding for travel to rural or underserved areas, program development grants, or access to university facilities for hosting workshops or events. Consider requesting administrative support to help manage the coordination of your outreach activities. If applicable, discuss access to technology for virtual programming, which has become increasingly important in recent years.

Extension faculty often rely on partnerships with external stakeholders, so it may also be helpful to negotiate for additional networking opportunities or institutional support to build relationships with industry, government agencies, or local organizations. Ensure that your position includes opportunities for professional growth, such as attending extension-focused conferences or pursuing certifications that enhance your effectiveness in community engagement.



When negotiating an extension faculty role, start by clarifying the scope of your extension activities. Photo courtesy of Flickr/University of Arkansas Agricultural Experiment Station. Published under this license.

Split appointment faculty often have responsibilities across teaching, research, extension, and service, making it critical to carefully address workload expectations during negotiations. Negotiate for a clear and balanced division of responsibilities across your roles and ensure that the expectations for each component are explicitly outlined in your offer. Request a reduced workload in some of your appointments during your first few years to provide the flexibility needed to establish a thoughtful, strategic, and integrated overall program. For example, many institutions provide reduced teaching loads or may expect a lower publication rate during the first two years as you build your program and gain momentum.

Salary, benefits, and the start dates are equally important to address. Be sure to benchmark your base salary against that of recent hires at comparable institutions in the region, and negotiate summer pay if your position is tied to the academic year.

Make sure you understand if those comparable salaries are based on 9-month or 12-month faculty contracts. Many institutions offer partial summer salary support during the first two years if you are on a 9-month contract. If you're an international candidate, be sure to clarify terms and conditions with administrators for employment-based VISA and/or application support for permanent residency. Negotiations on start dates are particularly important for recent graduates and individuals about to graduate as you need to carefully consider the best routes for closing out your current projects and completion of your degree. Additionally, make sure the benefits such as healthcare, retirement plans, and parental leave policies are clearly understood as most of these items are set in policy at the university level and may not be available for the department chair or dean to modify. For candidates seeking a dual-career hire, searching for the institution's policies and inquiring with colleagues about their reputation in accommodating such requests can help prepare you for effective discussions.



One of the most important principles in negotiation is to get all terms in writing. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/DragonImages.

One of the most important principles in negotiation is to get all terms in writing. Only items explicitly included in the signed contract are legally binding. Verbal agreements, even those made in good faith, are not enforceable. Administrators and institutional policies often change over time, and financial circumstances can shift unexpectedly. By ensuring that critical terms (such as dual-career hiring arrangements, start-up packages, and other commitments) are documented in your contract, you protect yourself against potential misunderstandings. This distinction between

promises and obligations becomes especially significant during periods of institutional uncertainty.

The importance of dual-career hiring

For many candidates, dual-career hiring is one of the most critical—and potentially sensitive—aspects of negotiation. When applicable, securing a position for a spouse within the university is often the most influential point of a candidate's decision to accept an offer. While dual-career accommodations are becoming more common in academia, navigating these discussions requires strategy and patience. Timing is key. Dual-career hiring requests are best raised immediately after receiving the verbal offer from the department chair and before finalizing contract terms in writing (i.e., when legal negotiations end). This timing ensures the institution is serious about hiring you and then promptly lets them start their internal processes to explore opportunities for your spouse.

When negotiating dual-career hiring, it is crucial to approach the manner collaboratively and as an evolving conversation. Remember, you are not only negotiating with the department chair directly on items they are authorized to decide, but they are also the intermediary for higher-level negotiation items that require dean-level authorization and approval. So, the more they understand the value of the dual-career hire, the more confident they will feel about taking the matter up with their dean and the better they will be able to represent the dual-hire benefit. For instance, if your partner's expertise complements the department's or college's existing strengths or addresses a gap, then highlight this match. Be open to creative solutions but realize that the most common cultural approach is for employers to offer one option (i.e., job classification) with the expectation that it is your role to then ask for a higher-level option. Securing support from the department chair strengthens your case at the

dean's level. However, it is important to remain patient. Dual-career hiring often involves multiple administrative layers and may take weeks or even months to finalize as everyone involved is attempting to obtain the most benefit within the available institutional resources.

Lessons learned

Negotiation is a skill that requires continuous practice and thoughtful reflection. After each negotiation, take time to evaluate your performance. Did you make hasty decisions out of excitement or pressure? If so, is there something you could have done to help yourself feel more ready to defer an answer to gather more information or discuss it with your partner? These reflections will sharpen your negotiation skills and prepare you for future discussions.

Managing emotions during negotiation is another valuable skill. It can be challenging to remain composed when an offer does not meet your expectations or when discussions become tense. If you feel emotions flooding your senses, then you can calmly say that you would like to take the day to think over your discussion and their offer. In fact, it is the most honest statement to make in that situation since the emotions are a clear indicator that you need time to gain a clear and accurate view on the issue. This also allows you to consider what you want to focus on for the next conversation and how you want to phrase your statement. Oftentimes, people tend to provide as many reasons as possible to justify a request during negotiations. However, empirical evidence from organizational psychology indicates that focusing on just one or a few of the strongest points is the most convincing approach in negotiations. Essentially, you let the strongest points stand for themselves while not diluting them with other points that may be more easily picked apart and distracting.



Managing emotions during negotiation is another valuable skill. Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock/SITTAKAN.

You may also compromise on negotiating one aspect of the offer completely so that you can focus on another aspect. For example, one colleague recalls a start-up package offer that was significantly lower than expected whereas the salary matched their needs. Instead of reacting, they requested time to review the offer without sharing any immediate thoughts with the department chair. This allowed them to prepare a data-driven counterproposal for more start-up funds. During the next conversation, the department chair immediately offered a higher salary as they anticipated there would be a concern about that aspect. First, the colleague thanked the department chair and told them the new salary offer sounded great. Then, they let the department chair know they wanted to focus on the start-up package (and discuss their data-driven counterproposal) to ensure their first research projects would be successful and well positioned when applying for external funds. This approach ultimately resulted in a higher salary and doubling the start-up package.

For another colleague's situation, nearly the exact opposite situation occurred where the start-up package was sufficient but the salary and dual-career hiring offer was inadequate. After a series of honest and collaborative conversations, the salary and dual-career hire were successfully negotiated so to maximize the benefits to both the university and the colleague. However, effective negotiation also involves compromise.

Remember that you and the university are making compromises and working to find what will be successful for all parties.

Finally, mentorship can be an invaluable resource. Colleagues who have recently navigated the negotiation process can provide insights into institutional norms, potential pitfalls, and strategies for success. Whether it is learning about shared facilities or understanding how to advocate for specific resources, their experiences can help you make informed decisions. Just remember that each negotiation situation is unique. So, avoid the temptation to assume a mentor's experience or advice is best for your situation. Instead, integrate their input into your own assessment of the situation to create your own informed and thoughtful decision.

Remember to approach negotiations as a collaborative process. Justify your requests with clear, data-driven arguments, and maintain a positive, enthusiastic attitude about joining the institution.

Navigating challenges

A common fear among candidates is that pushing too hard during negotiations could result in an offer being withdrawn. Such cases are rare. However, when they do occur, it

typically arises from extreme demands or confrontational behavior. To avoid this outcome, remember to approach negotiations as a collaborative process. Justify your requests with clear, data-driven arguments, and maintain a positive, enthusiastic attitude about joining the institution. If a dual-career hire proves challenging, then help the administrators to focus on how the dual hire is a shared goal that benefits you and the university with immediate and long-term benefits. If you sense the university's demands and behavior is confrontational or extreme, then you should consider whether you want to kindly withdraw your application or proceed with the negotiations.

In his book *Think Again*, the organizational psychologist Adam Grant described how expert negotiators are observed to (1) spend about a third of their planning on finding common ground so that they can effectively "dance" during their negotiations; (2) focus on the few strongest arguments and not let weaker arguments dilute the strategy; (3) rarely go on the defense or offense; (4) ask questions during the negotiation, which occurs, on average, about every fifth comment they made; and (5) make a point to share their honest feelings about how the negotiation was proceeding and ask if their understanding of the feelings of the other person or group were accurate. Keeping similar approaches and methods in mind while you negotiate a job offer will likely serve you well and help you hone your negotiation skills.

Looking ahead

Negotiation is not merely about obtaining a higher salary or more lab space; it is about establishing the foundation for a fulfilling and productive academic career. Whether advocating for dual-career hiring, securing research resources, or refining your teaching responsibilities, negotiation is an essential tool for achieving professional success. As academia continues to evolve, so do the dynamics of negotiation.

However, the primary goal will remain the same: to effectively set faculty up to advance knowledge through science and engineering.

Approach each negotiation with preparation, confidence, and a willingness to collaborate. Remember that you are the expert in your field, and advocating for your needs will benefit not only you, but also the institution that hires you. By practicing your negotiation skills and seeking guidance from mentors, you can navigate the complexities of academic negotiations with clarity and assurance.

Good luck, and happy negotiating!

References and recommended reads

Corso, J. (2024). *How to negotiate your first faculty job offer.* https://medium.com/@jasoncorso/how-to-negotiate-your-first-faculty-job-offer-852beed1dd73

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