

The Professor Is In: Can I Negotiate?

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I got a job offer. Yay! But I only got one offer, and I'm a brand new Ph.D., so I assume I don't really have the standing to negotiate anything. That's only for people who have competing offers or amazing records, right?



This is one of the most common misunderstandings about negotiating. Every candidate has the potential to negotiate elements of a job offer. That's true even if you have no competing offer, and are a brand new Ph.D. The only reason ever to hesitate on this front is if you've picked up red flags about the institution being one that possibly rescinds offers.

It's still extremely rare for a department to withdraw an offer, and you can further reduce the likelihood of that happening by moving carefully as you negotiate particular kinds of offers and by looking out for the warning signs.

Before tackling those details, let me review the normal negotiating expectations of any job offer. You are expected to negotiate. The key is to match your requests with the rank and type of institution making the offer and with the conventions in your general field. So candidates with offers from an Ivy League or a private R1 university have the greatest scope for negotiating. At Public R1s and very elite liberal-arts colleges, you will have considerable scope. At R2 institutions, public regional comprehensive universities, and well-known liberal-arts colleges, you will have some scope. And at teaching colleges with very heavy teaching loads or at small, obscure liberal-arts colleges with a current or previous religious affiliation, you will have the least scope for negotiating, and may well have none at all. (I will not discuss community colleges in this column as those have distinct conventions, but it is usually possible to negotiate some elements of your offer on those campuses, too).

Tailor your negotiating strategy. The worst mistake any new hire can make is to attempt an R1 negotiation at a tiny college, or a tiny-college negotiation at an R1. In the former case, you deeply offend the department with what are tone-deaf requests that appear uncollegial and entitled (and are the things that prompt offers to be rescinded, as

I'll discuss below). In the latter case, you end up with salary and support that are far less than what you actually merit, and what your other colleagues who did negotiate correctly enjoy.

In my career-consulting work, hearing about rescinded offers is very painful, but a close second is hearing about a poorly negotiated R1 offer — that is, when someone writes to me to say “I got an R1 offer and since I read your chapter on negotiating I got a \$1,000 increase in my salary! I'm so happy!” It's painful because I know that person could have negotiated an increase in salary of \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year, along with a host of other gains.

Of course I don't say that in those situations — once a negotiation is done, it's done. You can't go back and seek to do it over.

You also have to be aware of negotiating conventions in your discipline and field. A beginning tenure-track offer in English is going to bear no resemblance to an offer in finance, which will bear little resemblance to an offer in astronomy — even if all three occur at the same elite R1 university. To be clear: Salary and startup funds for the new assistant professor of English will be considerably lower than for the other two, and the teaching load, higher. The startup package in English will be in the four-figure range, or perhaps in the low five-figures. For the finance position, salary and startup funds will be far higher, and the teaching load far lower, maybe even a 1-1 load. The startup package will be the mid-five-figure range. For the assistant professor of astronomy, salary will be high, the teaching load low, and the startup package will be, well, astronomical — six figures or even seven.

You cannot negotiate above your field norms. An English hire cannot make a case for a finance-level teaching load or an astronomy-level startup package. Your field is your field, and it has conventions.

I can hear some of you saying, “but how will I *know* the status of the institution, and how will I *know* the conventions of my field?” Those are reasonable questions, although if you bring your research A-game to the process of researching academic job negotiations — by [reading my columns](#) here and [my book](#) (it has three chapters on negotiating), and by reading [other articles on the subject](#) on *Vitae* and elsewhere — you should gain a good foundation of knowledge.

The most important thing for those who garner a tenure-track offer: Work with a mentor who has a broad and deep sense of the field and its norms, and of the institutional landscape. Talk with your adviser or another faculty member whom you trust to be savvy in these matters. How do you know who is savvy about negotiating? That person will ask to see the specifics of the job offer — i.e., the salary, startup funds, moving support, computer and software, equipment and lab arrangements (if you have those), conference travel funding, continuing annual research support, summer salary, spousal support, and so on — and engage with each element individually, thoughtfully, and holistically, so that the sum total of your requests is meaningful but not overwhelming or inappropriate.

Be on the lookout for red flags. Is the offer from a very small, obscure college that has a current or prior religious affiliation? Does the offer include salary and almost nothing else? Is the salary extremely low (\$50K or below), and is the college pressuring you to accept within 24 or 48 hours? Those are among the red flags that a department will yank the offer if you try to negotiate. Tread carefully if those conditions apply, and be sure and read the chapter on the rescinded offer in my book.

A final note about urgency. Many inexperienced negotiators panic and believe that they have to respond within minutes to all emails from the department, and conclude the negotiation in a rush. They allow themselves to be pressured and hustled by department heads, and rush through decisions without adequate thought. That comes from inexperience, from long years of being devalued, and from poor or nonexistent advising.

In fact, once you've been given an offer, you are entitled to sit with it for some days, and to ask for time to consider it. Even if a department head is hustling you for a response, you are not obliged to be hustled (with the caveat of studying for the rescinding red flags above).

When I work with negotiating clients, they often send me emails marked “Urgent! Must respond within the hour!” —

which, when I read them, carry no such urgency at all, and could easily be studied and responded to over a day or more. Please don't allow your panic and inexperience to pressure you into hasty decisions. Your first tenure-track offer is one of the most significant moments of your whole life, and certainly of your career. Take time to consider it carefully, and confer about it with trusted mentors and your family. Good luck.

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For more advice, order Dr. Karen's new book, [The Professor Is In: The Essential Guide to Turning Your Ph.D. Into a Job](#).

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