

Example phone conversation between a faculty candidate “Postdoc” and their future Department Chair “Dr. A”. Dr. A has emailed Postdoc an offer letter, and Postdoc responded by email, requesting an appointment to discuss by Zoom.

Postdoc:

Hi Dr. A! Thank you so much for sending me the offer letter and for giving me such a generous amount of time to discuss the offer with my partner and with my advisors.

As I mentioned when you first called to let me know that an offer would be extended, I’m extremely excited about the opportunity to join the Department of Biochemistry at Research University. I strongly believe that Research University offers a truly unique opportunity to launch my independent research program, and with your support, I hope to be able to accept this offer, make a successful transition into the assistant professor role and establish myself as a productive scientist in the Department over the long term.

Dr. A:

I hope so too. So, what questions do you have?

Postdoc:

Well, I believe that our common interests are to ensure that my chances for scientific success, promotion, and tenure at Research University are maximized. So after careful consideration, I wanted to see if you have any flexibility on a few points that will impact my chances for future success. There are five requests and I’ve organized them in order of priority.

Dr. A:

Ok I appreciate your organization. Let’s get started.

Postdoc:

I greatly appreciate the commitment that the Department has made to a laboratory start-up package. While I have complete confidence in institutional intent, I’m cognizant of the fact that you, Dr. A, will be retired when I begin my position in 14 months, and that I will be working through some of the final details of my startup with a new Chair. Because of this anticipated change in leadership, my trusted advisors believe it is imperative that some specifics of the start-up package be included in the current offer letter. Therefore, I’d like to request that the following details, which are based on my informal discussions with you during my campus visit, could be included formally in this letter:

- Lab space: 2 bays in the MPRB, totaling 500 square feet, fully renovated
- Adequate funds for salary and benefits for 2 lab personnel (e.g. technician and post-doc) for at least 3 years
- Total start-up funds (excluding my salary support) that will fall within the typical range for lab-based, basic scientific investigators within the Department. I understand, based on previous discussions that the range is between \$250,000-\$300,000 for 3-year packages.

Dr. A:

Hmmm...ok getting that in writing won't be a problem. We don't normally commit to budgets in writing this far in advance of our fiscal year. But as you mentioned, I'll be moving on so it's a fair request. I'll include those figures in the next version of the offer letter I send. It may require another conversation however, as you've asked for a lot of details there.

Postdoc:

I totally understand, and am aware that's an unusual request. I really appreciate it! So I'll move on to my next item.

As you know, I believe that the ability to balance research momentum with classroom teaching time will be key to my scientific productivity and my successful transition into an independent investigator who can consistently bring in research dollars for the department. For this reason, I'd like to ask that you consider reducing my teaching requirement during year two from two courses to one.

Dr. A:

Hmmm. At this point I just can't commit to that. It would be highly unusual for a new faculty member not to be carrying their full load by year 2. Plus, as Chair, I'd have to tell a more senior member of the department that they have to carry your extra course load – that's going to be a tough sell on my part.

Postdoc:

Oh I get it. Of course that makes sense. But...I wonder if an alternate solution could be for the department to assign me a teaching assistant for year 2, using departmental funds? Having that kind of support with grading and preps could really help me keep up my research momentum in the lab even during my teaching service time without.

Dr. A:

I can't guarantee anything but I'll check with my admin, who schedules TA's and manages that part of the budget. We have to be fair with the rest of the faculty too. Anyhow, if we can do it, I'll write it into the next version of the letter. Ok what's next?

Postdoc:

I understand...thank you for checking on the possibility of a TA for me in year 2. So next, I would like to discuss what is possible in terms of salary negotiation. While taking into consideration the range of salaries for faculty in the Department, I had hoped that the salary you offered would have reflected my previous 2 years' experience as an Assistant Adjunct professor at UCSF. During the two years following my postdoctoral appointment, as a junior faculty member at UCSF fully funded on my own grants, I believe that I have garnered a reputation as a rigorous scientist whose work has moved toward independence. My current UCSF salary is just over \$95,000 and I hope there may be a way to provide a boost in my salary commensurate with the elevation of my role, and well above the proposed salary.

This request would start a conversation between Dr. A and Postdoc, about the technicalities of salary levels and expectations at that university. After that is settled...

Postdoc:

So my fourth item is around additional research funds. I would like to request an additional Discretionary Research Fund of \$25,000, to fund things like travel to scientific meetings, miscellaneous research equipment and supplies, computer equipment, software licenses, publication expenses, professional and licensing fees...all the things that will take time and extra departmental and administrative effort if I have to request each item individually over the next few years. I am aware that several other junior faculty members in the Department have really benefited from having access to this type of discretionary fund, and I believe that such funds will be invaluable for my professional development and for establishing myself as an independent, successful scientist.

Dr A:

Sounds like you really did your research when you talked with the other faculty members! It's true that for a few years, Discretionary Research Funds were a standard part of our offer letters. The reason your letter did not mention DRF's was because the pot of money was from a one-time donor and the funds are all used up now. It was nice but now I just don't have that pot of money to draw from anymore. I'm sorry.

Postdoc:

Ah, I understand. But I wonder if there's any other way to help me avoid the hassle of having to request help and small amounts of funds for all of those kinds of items. It would be great if I could manage that on my own like the other junior faculty do? *Discussion ensues.*

Postdoc:

So I'll just move on to my last item. When I visited, we had agreed on a start date of February 1, 2024, six months later than originally discussed and 14 months from now. Would you be willing to update the offer letter to reflect that date?

Dr. A:

Ah, yes, good catch. I'll fix that.

Postdoc:

Well that was a lot, and I really appreciate your help in talking me through all of those items! I understand that in the next version of the offer letter, you'll include details about the start up funds, you'll check on the possibility of a TA for me in year 2, and you'll let me know how the salary and DRF might be resolved. I'll look forward to the chance to talk further about what it is possible in those requests!

And to wrap it up, I'd just like to reiterate my enthusiasm about joining the Department at Research University. I acknowledge that this is an incredible opportunity to begin my independent career at a world class institution and an internationally recognized Department. I hope that we can reach a mutually beneficial agreement that will provide me with the opportunity to make a final commitment on this offer.