



You've Been Offered the Chair...But Do You Know Enough to Take It?

BY DAVID J. BACHRACH

You've been offered the chair of a department at a different medical school and have been impressed with the way the search process has been handled over the past six months. You have submitted a carefully thought out vision statement for the department and the dean has accepted it in principle. You now have been asked to construct a comprehensive statement of expectations and resource needs. You have been invited to communicate with the school's associate deans concerning any other information you feel you may need before next month's final visit.

The information you have received throughout the search process has been helpful and quite comprehensive, but you are now wondering what questions you haven't asked, and what further information you should have in order to make a firm and final decision.

Most people undergo such a significant, life-changing decision only a few times in their careers, and although they may get advice from others who have been through the process, the best guidance may come from those who negotiate these packages all the time, even those who have done so from the "other side of the table." Here are some things you can do to help you answer the question, "Do I know enough to accept this position?"

What Information Do I Need to Make a Decision?

The Personal Package

Let's get the personal part of the package out of the way. Get information on competitive salaries for chairs in your discipline. The best source will be through your current chair, the department administrator, or your institution's associate dean for faculty affairs or administration and finance—if you are comfortable revealing that you are in a search. Otherwise, you may need to work through a colleague at another institution

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or ask your new institution to provide documentation. These individuals likely have access to AAMC salary data and/or data collected by your discipline's society of department chairs.

You should propose a salary either at or above the AAMC's 50th percentile, or determine whether the school has a practice of compensating all its chairs at a given percentile level. Upward adjustments in high housing cost areas, or access to housing/mortgage support funds, may be discussed. Many schools offer an incentive component tied to the chair's leadership performance, although some either guarantee this in the first year or add it to the compensation package as a part of setting goals for year two and beyond.

Basic benefit packages are probably not negotiable, but some elements of the package may be discussed, including starting date; relocation costs for family members, household contents, automobiles, and office/laboratory equipment; office/laboratory renovations; office/mobile equipment, such as computers and cell phones; interim housing and travel between acceptance and relocation dates; interim travel for up to one year if your family doesn't relocate at the same time that you commence your new role; and leadership coaching support for your first year or two.

The Chair's Leadership Package

You will undoubtedly get advice from friends and colleagues concerning the negotiation process. There are often two things told to people in your position at this time:

(1) Whatever you do, get it now and get it in writing! And (2) More is better—and a lot more is better still (sometime referred to as "package envy").

However, here are some things you *really* need to know:

- ❖ The offer needs to be "sufficient"—not necessarily large, but sufficient to get the job done. Accordingly, it's the program description that you have put forward, the timeline for its accomplishment, and the measures of success that need to be pinned down in writing, more so than the precise resources you will receive—although it is important to build and agree on an inventory of resources, as described below.
- ❖ You will not be able to anticipate everything you will need to be successful over the next five to 10 years—no one can. As such, it is more important that you, the dean, and the senior staff in medical administration agree in writing to the principle that, within reason, resources needed to be successful that are not committed to as a part of the offer will be provided in good faith in the future, to the degree that the institution can respond at that time.
- ❖ It is important is that you and the dean mutually agree to the following principle: "If I lead the department to a level of performance equal to or greater than that which has been described in your offer and my acceptance, I will have access to additional resources to take the department to the next level, as I will describe in my rolling five-year vision statement and action plan." Most deans will welcome such a discussion, as it speaks to your focus on accomplishment, and not just a large package of resources for the sake of bragging rights.

There is rarely as much information available to you as you would like; you will need to trust those with whom you have been dealing and will depend on at your

new institution. Your confidence in the commitments of others can be enhanced by taking a number of simple steps. First, plan your final visit to include one-on-one visits with the chairs who are the “power brokers” at the institution; include chairs who have been recruited by the incumbent dean in the past three years, as they can tell you how well commitments are honored. Further, meet with the search committee to convey that you intend to call on them once you arrive to assist with your transition. And third, at many institutions one or more of the associate deans are involved in developing and negotiating chair packages. With so many contributors, I have witnessed various levels of clarity—and ambiguity—in offer letters. It is important that if they do not do so, you should develop a reference document that specifies commitments, and make it a part of the offer documentation.

Inventory of Current and Incremental Resources

Most recruitment package negotiations are built on a commitment to incremental resources: “How much [positions/space for various functions/dollars] will you add to the department’s resource base as a part of my recruitment?” In my judgment, the best-constructed offer packages describe *all* resources accessible to the new chair—those that now exist and those that will be added as a part of this commitment. Here is some information to ask for as you prepare for your visit:

- ❖ **People:** Ask for a list of all faculty, by subdiscipline, rank, age (yes, you can ask for this information), and any commentary on likely duration of tenure with the institution. A discussion in advance of your visit with the associate dean for faculty affairs regarding these data, and the policies and practices followed by the institution concerning adjustments in faculty appointments, will let you know how much flexibility you will have to shape the department in the next few years, and thus will provide additional justification for how many new positions (and core support) you will need to request.
- ❖ **Space:** An inventory of all space in the department (including annotations about the condition of the space and its suit-



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ability to support the programs you have described) is essential before you start talking about incremental space or large, nonrecurring dollar allocations for remodeling or new construction. A department with grossly outdated space will require a larger package for remodeling than one that has access to new, well-designed space.

- ❖ **Schedules** of existing resources (separate schedules for positions, space, equipment, and recurring and nonrecurring funds) including what now exists, what will be added, and when this will occur, should be requested. This multidimensional matrix is complicated and will likely have many footnotes explaining complex relationships and referencing institutional policies, procedures, practices, and principles.

With a draft of your spreadsheet in hand, plan to visit with each one of the individuals who will be responsible for honoring these commitments. For example, the associate dean for research may control research space; plan to go over the commitment for new (or retained) research space with him or her, walk the space with this person and the school’s facilities expert see if their assessment of current condition is consonant with the intended use, and/or whether the dollars allocated for upgrading

will get the job done (You might say, “I am not interested, per se, in how much money is in the package for this work; I care only that it is sufficient to get the job done in such a fashion and timeframe in which I can recruit and retain faculty.”) You’ll want to go through a similar exercise for office, educational, and clinical space allocated to the department for fulfillment of your vision. Ideally, you will secure the “sign-off” of each associate dean or hospital director on your offer package for each area of responsibility.

Finally, you need to ask about the culture of the institution—not necessarily what people say they want it to be, but rather what it really is. Some institutions subscribe to the credo, “Each tub on its own bottom,” while others speak sincerely about collaboration. An institution that says “We reward collaboration and cooperation with a greater willingness to make funds available to those who demonstrate better utilization of resources by sharing expensive assets” gives you greater flexibility for deploying committed assets. Knowing the culture will be a factor in determining the level of specificity with which you will need to be comfortable when making your decision whether to accept the offer.

Summary

Few candidates will have as much information, or as much time, as they would like to make a commitment to their new position. Accordingly, key factors need to be in place, along with as many specifics as can be agreed to in advance. Essential is a clear characterization of the department five and 10 years hence; a sense of trust with the dean and senior staff that resources will be sufficient to accomplish these goals; an understanding of the culture, as well as policies and practices, of the institution, with the agreement that these are sufficient to allow you to sculpt the department as needed; and, last, that those who have come before you speak to the veracity and integrity of the people with whom you will deal, so you will know that what they say is what they mean, and what they do. ❖

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