

By Brandon Brown

The art of academic negotiation

I was meeting my new colleagues at a wine and cheese reception. Some of us early-career academics—all members of underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups—started to talk about salaries. I shared how, after years of feeling undervalued, I had doubled my salary in my new job as assistant professor compared with what I was earning as a lecturer a year prior. Jaws dropped. There were lots of questions. We all agreed that we were ill-prepared to negotiate. No classes had taught us that skill, and people didn't really talk about it. This is probably a challenge for many, but it particularly affects underrepresented minorities who may be first-generation college students and are less likely to have academic mentors with similar experiences. We often find ourselves navigating academia blindly.

I didn't enter public health research to make millions of dollars, but I hoped not to struggle. I grew up in a single-parent household, with my amazing mother working multiple jobs to make ends meet. I thought academia was my ticket to financial stability.

But when I started my postdoc, I was surprised at how low the salary was after so many years of education. Then it came time to apply for faculty jobs. I got an offer—for less than I had earned as a postdoc. I thought I deserved more, but my internal impostor syndrome voice told me I was lucky to be offered any job in academia. I had no idea how to negotiate. I didn't know that negotiation was even possible. When I voiced concern about the salary, I received a handshake and a verbal promise that it would increase in a year. I trusted this promise and signed on the dotted line.

I jumped into gear, creating teaching materials for eight courses, taking on administrative roles, starting a new campus global health center, conducting research, supervising staff, and mentoring students. My energy was boundless, but not my time. I began to understand the invisible labor of mentoring students from underrepresented groups who came to me for support—requests that would probably be even more frequent if I were a woman or sexual or gender minority. I was also asked to join several committees that wanted to diversify their makeup. I believed all my efforts would be rewarded in line with the original handshake agreement, and I waited.

After 2 years, I finally got the nerve to ask for a raise. I went in prepared with documentation of strong teaching, administrative work, research grants, staff supervised, students mentored, and other faculty members' salaries—



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which I had recently learned were available online because I worked at a public university. But my efforts were for naught. I was told that if I wanted a higher salary, I needed to go out and get an offer from another school. I felt betrayed. I thought I brought enough value to warrant an increase. Did they not care if I left? And what about that handshake?

Once I was on the job market, I realized my true value. I learned from mentors that I could negotiate for much more than salary, including startup funds, moving expenses, parking, laboratory space, graduate research assistants, administrative support, teaching load, and more. I took my best offer back to my institution and they matched it. However, other problems persisted. Six months later I accepted an offer—which I had negotiated well, resulting in that doubling of my salary from a year prior—for a tenure-track job at my current institution.

I now frequently lecture about academic negotiation—and share my mistakes. I try to emphasize a few key points. Salary is negotiable, and it's not the only part of an academic contract that you can negotiate. Verbal agreements are easily forgotten; if something is not in writing, it doesn't exist. Offer letters set your market worth in academia. And committing time and energy to service such as committee work and indispensable mentoring—even if substantially above and beyond the norm—doesn't usually pay off in terms of salary. To help one another grow and prosper, we need to talk about these things and share our stories. ■

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