Midcareer Mentoring, Part 2

By Female Science Professor

One of the most complicated issues you will face as a tenured professor is whether to pursue a job at another institution, or consider "feelers" asking if you are willing to move.

In Part 1 of this series, I looked at some of the general post-tenure career issues that can provoke a great deal of anxiety. Whether and how to change jobs is one of the most complex.

If you get a job offer but are not absolutely sure you want to leave your current position, the next step is to try to negotiate a counteroffer. If you are desperate to leave, presumably you will just accept the offer and not negotiate (unless you want to see, out of curiosity, how much your current institution values you).

What will your department do to try to keep you? Will it try? I am sure there are instances in which a university is happy that a particular professor got an outside offer and hopes that he or she will depart at the earliest opportunity. But I think it is more common for an institution to try to retain faculty that are being recruited away.

Let's say you want to stay on but hope to improve your situation somehow, so you bring your new opportunity to the attention of your department chair and other administrators. Typically, you will either be offered a standard retention package...
(meaning, a raise), or there will be some sort of negotiation process. You may be asked what you want.

That leads to two questions: What do you want? And: Are you going to get it?

Even if you know what you want to request, my recommendation is that you consult with senior colleagues who have gone through the process, ideally people who have done so in this millennium. At least some professors will be willing to talk about that. If possible, to get a good idea of your options, talk both to those who stayed and those who left.

So what do you want? A raise? More money and/or space for your research? A position for your significant other? More respect from your institution and colleagues? All of the above? If there is room for negotiation, here are some suggestions for how to approach a retention offer:

- If you are leaning heavily toward leaving, but an impressive retention package would convince you to stay, ask specifically for what you want. That isn't typically about greed; having an outside offer may be the only way to get a significant raise or more research space or other things that it is in the power of your institution to grant. You are probably only going to get what you request if your offer is from an institution that is more highly ranked than your current one, or at least from a place with which your university feels competitive in some way. You don't have to be obnoxious about the request—that is, don't accompany it with a threat to leave if your every wish isn't fulfilled. Just make your request, and let the administrators take it, leave it, or try to negotiate with you.

- If you are undecided about staying versus leaving, and your decision depends on how the negotiations go, you should still ask for what you want. Be more mindful about not burning bridges, but, at the same time, don't undersell yourself because you are worried about being seen as greedy or disloyal. I know that is a concern of some professors, most of whom are women, who write to me about this issue. But if you know that you are underpaid relative to your peers, or if you think this offer is your only chance to get more space or other research resources from your institution, go for it. Keep your tone professional. Don't rant to the chair or dean about all the things you hate about your department, institution, or colleagues. Just make a case for what you want and need. Administrators expect these situations. They may not welcome the negotiations, but they are a normal part of academic life, for better or worse.
• If you really don't want to leave, and pursued an outside offer only because you felt you needed to play the game, you should still make a reasonable request for what you want and see what happens. You don't have to give any indication of how likely you are to stay or go, although people will try to guess. If you have an offer, the opportunity exists for you to leave, so you might as well find out what, if anything, your current institution is willing to do to keep you.

• If you got the outside offer because you are desperately unhappy about some aspect of your job and you want to use this chance to change things for the better without actually leaving, you should keep your expectations reasonable—that is, low—in terms of how much positive change you can wring out of a retention package. You might get a raise, perhaps even an impressive one, but if you don't like your colleagues now, chances are you still won't like them, even when you are being paid more to spend time with them. They might respect you more: Outside offers tend to have that effect. And that can help, but by staying put, you may not experience the positive results of moving to a new institution that recruited you in a rapid, dramatic, or satisfying way.

And that brings me to an important point: You don't have to leave. If your institution doesn't give you what you ask for, or, worst case, doesn't even try to keep you, you still don't have to leave if you don't want to.

Some academics who write to me worry that if they start negotiations, that means they are threatening, "Give me a big raise, another 3,000 square feet of prime lab space, and a better office chair or I'm out of here." But you don't have to leave, even if you are offered only a token (or no) retention package. It is fine to explore your options, consider the pros and cons, and then decide whether you want to stay.

"Everyone does it" isn't the greatest justification for seeking an outside offer, but you can try to do it right. Don't be an egotistical jerk, don't be a drama queen, don't issue ultimatums, don't patronize your colleagues. And don't feel guilty—unless you are a habitual seeker of outside offers and retention goodies—in which case, maybe you should feel a little guilty.

You certainly should not feel disloyal. You may, with good reason, appreciate your institution for hiring you in the first place, giving you tenure, and fostering your career to a sufficient degree that you became attractive to other institutions. But remember, you have given a lot back to your college by doing excellent research, advising students and postdocs, teaching, and serving on various committees.
If you have done the job expected of you, and more, then you should feel good about your record and focus on what is best for you, your career, your family, or whatever your priorities are.

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