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# Tips and tricks to negotiating during an interview for early to mid-career librarians

Three perspectives

Limited actionable advice exists on negotiating salary when interviewing for academic library positions for early to mid-career librarians. In this article, we summarize insights shared by three library professionals during a recent ACRL Membership Committee webinar on this topic. In alphabetical order by last name, the following library professionals participated in this discussion: Jeff Bullington (library director at Adams State University), Melanie Hawks (director of library human resources/associate dean for diversity, equity, and inclusion at the University of Utah), and Lis Pankl (dean of Libraries at Mississippi State University).

## Questions to ask during the interview process

### *Coming into the interview prepared*

When you are an early- to mid-career librarian, knowing which questions to ask during the interview process is essential before you begin the salary negotiation process. Not being prepared with quality questions could derail the negotiation process and may lead to you ultimately not being offered the job.

As Hawks noted, you should always come prepared with questions for the search committee so you can determine if the institution is a good match for you. She emphasized that you need to see yourself working at the institution and understand what the work conditions might be. You need to understand the rank of the position you are applying to such as faculty, academic staff, or academic personnel. Are you applying as classified staff or to a unionized environment? What is the length of your contract, how is the position structured, and what are the implications of that structure to your total compensation?

### *Questions to ask before you receive the offer*

For each stage of the interview process, make sure you have your questions prepared ahead

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of time, so you aren't left wondering what is happening next during the interview process. There may be several stages to the interview. Toward the final stages of the interview, but before you receive an offer, you should make sure you speak to a hiring manager or administrator. Remember this is your interview, so you should ask the following questions that may impact your timeline and decision to move forward with the interview:

- What is the next step in the hiring process?
- What is the expected start date?
- What is the salary range?
- How quickly are they planning to come to a decision?

## **Negotiating the offer**

Congratulations, you've received an offer. But wait, there's more work for you to do before you immediately begin negotiating.

### *Clarifying questions*

Whether you're receiving your first offer right out of library school or you're a mid-career professional looking to move up in your career, it is challenging to control your enthusiasm when receiving an offer. Therefore, it's important to have questions prepared should you receive an offer, so you are ready to effectively move the process forward. Both Pankl and Hawks emphasized that it is vital to ask for adequate time to consider the offer. Additionally, Hawks pointed out that the first offer will likely be a verbal offer (i.e., over the phone or potentially over a video call), and it can be a high-pressure moment. She advised candidates to think about and come prepared for how they're going to handle that conversation. Come with some questions ahead of time that must be answered before potentially accepting the offer.

Being up front with the hiring manager is key, but "most importantly, know the room." According to Hawks, a question to have in your back pocket when you receive an offer is: "Is there any room to negotiate on any of the terms?" Once the door is open to negotiate with the hiring manager, you can determine if there is room to budge on the salary or on the start date or vice versa. Before you start negotiating on the offer, you need to "Make sure you ask questions the search committee will be receptive hearing."

### *Carefully review the offer*

Despite understandably being excited to receive an offer, it's very important that you pause before responding and give yourself time to review the offer. Burlington advised candidates to:

... make certain you give yourself time to give the offer and the opportunity a really good holistic review. It's not just the salary, [or] even the benefits, but also what are the other parts of this offer and this opportunity that are things that you may or may not be sure you would find in some other job that would be good skills or good different kinds of elements for you.

It is important to clarify and document the offer you receive over the phone. You should make sure you receive a written offer and make certain to clarify what those elements of the offer are and how they're going to be documented. Because typically you'd want those elements of the offer to be documented in the formal communication that you get from the institution.

### *Relocating? Consider (hidden) living expenses*

Pankl shared that there's more to think about than just the proposed salary, stating,

I left a job in New York, took a job in Utah for slightly less pay, but because of state income tax, I actually brought home more money. That's one of those sneaky things. Also, things like utilities are important. Before I moved to New York, I thought utilities were the same everywhere and they're not, they can be double, even triple in different states. And also, things like schools. So, my first job was at LSU. Baton Rouge has a lot of private schools and, the public school system isn't that great. Things like that really can come into play.

Relocating can be daunting and expensive. Sometimes an institution has funds specifically to help new hires move, but they may not. Bullington pointed out that when you think you are at the stage of the interview process where you will likely move, you should ask the following questions:

- What is the housing relocation allowance?
- What is the moving relocation allowance?
- Do they have a place that you could move to for a year while you're figuring out the area?
- What is the area you're moving to like?

While every institution has its own culture, institutions and librarians might be willing to help new hires relocate, if you ask. Some questions you may want to ask, said Hawks, are:

- Is there faculty housing you could live in while looking for a house?
- Will the institution pay for a house-hunting trip so that you can come out and, actually in-person, look around in the area and hopefully find a place?
- What additional support can they give you and your family to relocate?

Perhaps librarians at the institution you are interviewing can drive you around so that you can learn about which neighborhoods are good, which school districts are acceptable, etc.

### *This job on the timeline of your career*

Bullington advised candidates to keep in mind that "oftentimes this is not your last job." He encouraged candidates to remind themselves, "I'm not going to be here forever, but this will allow me to gain some skills and experience that I want, as well as contribute to the organization that I'm going to be a part of."

### *Picture yourself within the organization*

Before accepting an offer, you should try to envision yourself working at the institution and living in that city. According to Hawks,

... it's very important to know the organization as an employer, as much as possible. A lot of times through this interview process, the information that you're taking in will often be very focused on what is the job like? What are the colleagues like? What are the great projects that are going on here? What is this institution known for? And those are all wonderful things. But you really want to understand what would it be to actually work here, to be an employee who is subject to all of the policies, all of the procedures, all of the compensation structure that's there. You really want to not underestimate how important that's going to be to you once you actually arrive.

She suggested questions candidates can ask themselves, such as:

- Is this a place that's going to be very rigid and rule-bound?
- Is this a place that is going to be more open and flexible?
- Is this a place where things seem to be pretty transparent?
- Is this a place where I don't feel I'm getting very full and clear answers to my questions?

### *Know your deal-breakers*

There will and should be certain variables that are deal-breakers for you. Hawks provided the following examples:

... if you just can't see yourself living in the Florida humidity, be honest with yourself about that. If you are currently making, say \$50,000, and you can't see yourself going below that, even though you might be going to a lower cost of living area, or there might be great opportunities in the job [or] if in your mind you just can't go below of what you're currently making—know that. That would be a deal-breaker for you, and it's important to understand that about yourself.

## **How do you know an organization's limitations?**

### *Conducting research*

Determining an organization's limits is an important part of the interview process, as well. Hawks shared that part of this process should include conducting research, and shared that:

... as you investigate the organization, maybe just even by going to their website looking at the kind of information that's available about the status of the position, about the university benefits, policies, and procedures, I think sometimes you can start to get a feel for, again, is this a place that everything seems very structured? Everything seems very planned out. That may likely be a place that is going to have more limitations than another institution. You can more explicitly ask this kind of a question as you get further and further in the process. I wouldn't ask it right out of the gate, in a first-round interview.

### *Asking direct questions*

However, there are times when simply candidly asking direct questions is the most effective approach. Hawks added that, "As you become a finalist, and particularly as you get an offer, even a verbal offer, you can just straight out ask, "Is there any flexibility on X?"

Bullington agreed and mentioned that candidates can also ask about other benefits that the institution offers that aren't necessarily addressed in the typical job description or application package. For example, he shared that while he works at a very small library, it is a "modern academic library" that has attractive experiential benefits beyond just the salary. He shared that his library is "doing almost all of the same things that any R1 institution is doing in various ways" and that he shares this with candidates,

If you come and work with us for a few years, you're going to get a really holistic understanding of what it takes to run an academic library, in this day and time. If nothing else, you're going to be able to see a lot of those connections in ways that if you're at a bigger place and in a bigger unit, and a little bit more compartmentalized, you may not.

### *Questions about career advancement*

Knowing how you will move up in the organization once you're ready to accept the job offer is key. The candidate should ask the following questions about career progression within the organization during the interview process:

- What are the opportunities for advancement?
- What is the tenure and promotion track?
- What professional development opportunities are there?
- Is there support for travel and professional development?

### *Explore organizational flexibility*

In addition to conducting research about an organization, and asking direct questions throughout the interview process, it's important to consider organizational flexibility. There are a number of variables that institutions may be flexible on. In terms of salary flexibility,

Bullington mentioned that it's helpful to determine what flexibility exists in the salary negotiation process up front, if possible. He shared that he presently works at an institution where he has "no latitude with salaries" and that he has a "flat salary that [he] can offer for a position." He added that he tries "to be very honest about that right up front and why."

Keep in mind that other variables beyond salary are likely going to provide more flexibility in terms of negotiation. Hawks echoed this, stating, "I think some things that are generally more likely to be flexible are things like the start date. You need a bridge between your current position, which you're going to have to quit, and the new position that you're going to have to probably relocate for. You can ask whether it's possible to begin your appointment before you're actually due on campus. And if so, what's the length of time that you might be able to get."

Other examples of potential flexible negotiation points are duties, responsibilities, and job titles. Hawks offered the following as a script for determining an organization's capacity to be flexible: "I know you're hiring me for X, is there any flexibility where I might be able to just spend some of my time on Y? Because I'm very interested in that."

## **Conclusion**

Negotiating salaries is challenging in the early to mid-stages of your career as a librarian. The advice shared in this article is not an exhaustive list of steps, but the actionable steps the panelists shared will help you when entering the negotiation phase of the job search. Remember while negotiating your salary, you must weigh all your options. We hope you find the advice shared useful to you. *zz*