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## Know Your Value: Negotiation Skill Development for Junior Investigators in the Academic Environment—A Report from the American Society of Preventive Oncology's Junior Members Interest Group

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# Know Your Value: Negotiation Skill Development for Junior Investigators in the Academic Environment—A Report from the American Society of Preventive Oncology's Junior Members Interest Group

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## Introduction

The American Society of Preventive Oncology (ASPO) is a professional society for multidisciplinary investigators in cancer prevention and control. One of the aims of ASPO is to enable investigators at all levels to create new opportunities and maximize their success. One strategy adopted by ASPO was to develop the Junior Members Interest Group in 1999. The Interest Group membership includes predoctoral fellows, postdoctoral fellows, and junior faculty members who are provided career development and training opportunities (1). Responsibilities of the members of the Junior Members Interest Group include serving on the ASPO Executive Committee and the Program Planning Committee and organizing professional development sessions at ASPO's annual meeting.

As part of the 2014 ASPO annual meeting, the Junior Members Interest Group organized a session entitled "Negotiation Skill Development for Junior Investigators in the Academic Environment." This interactive session was designed to provide early career investigators an opportunity to practice their negotiation skills and to receive expert advice and strategies to effectively negotiate new faculty positions in an academic environment. The session focused primarily on negotiating an initial academic appointment from a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow to an assistant professor-level position. In addition to the main focus, the session also covered renegotiation for assistant and associate-level investigators as they navigate through their careers. The session began with an interactive exercise led by Dr. Stephanie A.N. Silvera (Associate Professor of Public Health, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ) where participants engaged in a mock salary negotiation session with another member of the audience (Table 1). Following the negotiation exercise, Dr. Silvera led a

debriefing session. Next, four panelists at different levels in their academic careers were invited to provide their personal perspectives on the topic of effective negotiation: Dr. Faith Fletcher (Assistant Professor of Community Health Sciences, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL) to provide the perspective of a first-year faculty member; Dr. Stephanie A.N. Silvera (Associate Professor of Public Health, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ) to provide the perspective of a recently tenured faculty member; Dr. Karen Basen-Engquist (Professor of Behavioral Science and Director of the Center for Energy Balance, University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston, TX) to provide the perspective of a senior faculty member; and Dr. Peter G. Shields (Professor and Deputy Director of the Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center, Columbus, OH) to provide the perspective of a senior faculty member with extensive experience on the employer side of an academic appointment negotiation. This report summarizes the main themes that emerged from the negotiation exercise debriefing, the speakers' advice and recommendations, and responses to audience questions during the session.

## Lessons Learned from the Negotiation Exercise

During the negotiation session exercise (see Table 1 for details), there were distinct themes that emerged from the discussion. First, participants generally expressed satisfaction with the deals that they reached with their partners. However, many felt that they were uncertain about what would really be considered a "good deal." Second, during the course of the discussion, many participants were able to sense that their negotiating partners had constraints on specific terms within the offer and used the knowledge they believed they had when making counteroffers. None of the participants expressed concern that their negotiating partners were making unreasonable requests that deterred them from moving forward with the negotiation. And, third, participants found that salary was not always the primary factor in the negotiation. They noted that the salary seemed to be relatively constrained within a range, but other factors (such as vacation days and office location) were much more flexible. Participants, particularly potential employees, stated that as a result of this knowledge they shifted the negotiation away from salary and aimed for an overall package that they deemed as satisfactory.

## Know Your Value

One of the strongest themes that emerged during the panel discussion was that junior investigators should recognize their

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**Table 1.** Negotiation exercise

General instructions	<p>You are going to be given a character in a salary negotiation session. You have to read their background and negotiate as that person. Please pair up and decide who will be Sam and who will be Casey. See your handout for a description that is associated with your character and study it for a few minutes. Do not look at the description for the other person.</p> <p>Sam requested this phone conversation with Casey to discuss the offer. You have 15 minutes to negotiate. Sam will start by introducing him/herself.</p>
Sam	<p>After two rounds of phone interviews and an in person interview at STAR, a company producing energy drinks for athletes. Sam has just received an email for a job offer to lead operations of the celestial product line of on-the-go beverages in either Orlando or Cape Canaveral, Florida. Sam is enthusiastic as Sam has experience working in a production facility for a soup company, is an avid marathon runner, and consumer of STAR products.</p> <p>Originally born and raised in New York State, Sam attended both college and graduate school. Sam's partner is from Port Saint John, not too far from Cape Canaveral. Sam was looking for jobs in Florida as Sam's partner wanted to move closer to their family.</p> <p>Sam just read the offer letter and was a little concerned. The offer includes healthcare, dental insurance, two weeks of vacation, and a salary of \$39,000. In his current job he makes \$54,000 and has three weeks of vacation, which he uses frequently to take his daughter to traveling baseball games. He calculates with moving costs and the adjusted cost of living he would have to make at least \$42,500. Also the work shifts are four 10-hour shifts a week. If he works in Orlando, where headquarters are, he has an extra 1-hour commute every day each way.</p> <p>He knows the company really wants to develop new technology to put more celestial solids into energy drinks that he has experience working with in the soup industry. His company research and information through a connection said the company expects to pay between \$37,500–47,500 for the average product manager. An employee he interviewed said they were also flexible on vacation days.</p>
Casey	<p>Casey is the production manager at the STAR facility in Orlando. Her focus has been developing new products. She leads the only facility developing this particular line of products of celestial energy drinks. If they bring these products to market successfully, they will not only be the first energy company to integrate moon particles into products, they will likely lead the industry for the next several years and she will likely be promoted.</p> <p>After searching far and wide for a person with the ability to integrate the moon particles into the product she found Sam. Sam is one of few other candidates with this experience and they want him to come on board. Casey also wants Sam to work closely with her at the Orlando facility so she can keep a close watch on the success of the product launch.</p> <p>Casey also is on a tight budget. They are taking a chance on this new product line and can afford to pay up to \$46,000 due to the heavy investment in the new technology. They also have an extremely flexible working schedule at the headquarters. Employees can even work virtually for up to 2 days a week. The company culture is open and there is even an area for children or teens to stay at the facility during working hours.</p>
Debriefing questions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What was the agreement?</li> <li>2. Did it meet the requirements for both participants?</li> <li>3. Does Sam make enough? Is it within Casey's budget?</li> <li>4. Did you feel like you got a sense of what the other person's most important issues were?</li> <li>5. What were the primary issues in the negotiation?</li> <li>6. Were you satisfied with the agreement?</li> <li>7. What questions could you have asked to better understand each other's interests?</li> <li>8. What else could have been improved?</li> </ol>

value before beginning the negotiation process. For example, if an investigator brings a particular skill set that would fulfill an unmet need in the department, then he or she should emphasize this during the negotiation process, and discuss what resources he or she will need to be successful in meeting the department's need. Panelists stressed that institutions devote a considerable amount of time and resources to faculty searches and then will invest in the faculty member to help them establish their careers; both the new faculty and the institution want to come to an agreement that ensures the success of the faculty member. Junior investigators are commonly reluctant to express their needs during the negotiation process particularly for their first faculty job offer. One key way for a junior investigator to gauge his or her value to the institution is to thoroughly research the areas of expertise of other faculty members in the department as well as throughout the institution. The goal is to identify areas where the investigator's skill set would be valuable to the institution. If a junior investigator enters a negotiation with a clear sense of his or her value to an institution, he or she is much more likely to come to terms that set the stage for success as a junior faculty member. The terms of the new position

should maximize the likelihood of impactful research, grants, and publications. This is critical to both promotions and finding the next best faculty opportunity inside or outside the institution.

A junior investigator should enter a negotiation not only aware of his or her value, but also the type of academic and research institution that is best suited to meet his or her personal and professional goals. Specific issues to consider include the ideal balance between teaching and research and the investigator's interest in tenure-track versus nontenure-track positions. While some junior investigators enter the job market with this information and only submit applications to institutions that appear to suit these needs, others explore all of their options and have to assess the overall fit during the interview and negotiation process. While much of this report will focus on the details of the negotiation, the advice should be considered with the understanding that overall quality of life and the matching of the institution to an individual's personal and professional goals should be the top priority in any job search.

Knowing your value is particularly salient when a junior faculty member is in a position to renegotiate at later stages of his or her

career. Whether a faculty member realizes it or not, he or she is essentially always on the job market. As faculty members at all levels become successful, they attract attention from other institutions and may receive other offers. These opportunities allow the faculty member to either transition to a new institution or to renegotiate with their current institution. Another opportunity that may allow for renegotiation is when a junior investigator receives grant funding, which potentially increases his or her value to the institution. The themes presented here, while mostly aimed toward a negotiation for an initial faculty position, also apply to those times when a faculty member is renegotiating within his or her institution.

### **Use the Resources That Are Available to You and Negotiate with Accurate Information**

A junior investigator who enters the negotiation process with thorough information about the position and the institution has already taken a big step toward ending up with a package that will facilitate both short-term and long-term success. A salient challenge that most junior investigators encounter is assessing the appropriateness of the salary offer. Of all the metrics that come into play during the negotiation, the salary is one of the metrics that can be researched. Salaries of employees for public institutions are generally publically available on some websites (such as newspapers). The Texas Tribune, for example, allows individuals to search their database which contains information on every government employee in the state by name, institution, department, or faculty rank (2). It is important to recognize, however, that the public information could be misleading because sometimes income from bonuses, clinical revenue, or supplements for clinical or administrative assignments may not be included. Also, public information may only indicate a 9-month salary for those institutions where this is applicable. Nonetheless, the published information gives a junior investigator a starting point and can provide clarity on the target range. For positions within government institutions, many of those salaries are determined by the established pay grades and the positions are typically posted with a salary range. For private institutions, however, this information may not be readily available for specific institutions but aggregate information is available from organizations such as Higher Ed Jobs and the American Association of University Professors (3, 4). Another reference source would be the salary benchmarks published by specific professional associations. For example, the American Psychological Association publishes the data from their annual survey assessing faculty salaries in graduate departments of psychology (5). One salary-related factor that is easy to overlook is cost of living variations, which requires additional research on the part of the investigator to approach a negotiation with accurate information. If, for example, an investigator is considering two offers, one in Columbus, OH and one in Chicago, IL, the salary for the Chicago position would need to be approximately 32% higher for the two to be equivalent in terms of how well the salaries will cover cost of living (6). During the course of the negotiation, the institution is usually straight-forward, or should be straight-forward, with a candidate about the metrics used to determine salary and sometimes there is not as much flexibility as candidates would like. Keep in mind that salaries will become known by a junior investigator's colleagues over time, especially when collaborating on grant submissions where this is included

in the budget, so the institution has a strong interest in making sure that variations in salaries is minimal or can be easily justified to not create tension between faculty colleagues.

Salaries, of course, within limits, are often not a deciding factor for a new faculty position. The terms of the offer that maximize the possibility of a successful career should be a major determinant for accepting a position. What is considered a good start-up package or overall package will be highly varied by institution and discipline. Many institutions have a standard, discipline-based package that they offer junior investigators, but this is one area where there is often more room for negotiation than in the salary, including access to existing resources and pilot funding. One way to learn about an institution's standard practices is to talk to the members of the search committee who are open to this type of discussion. Equally important is to meet with recently recruited faculty to find out what works and does not work from their packages. Both of these can serve as valuable resources if they believe the candidate is a good fit for the institution. For junior investigators whose research requires expensive equipment that the institution does not currently own, the start-up package has to be sufficient to allow for these set-up costs. If the institution does not have the funds or lab space to provide a junior investigator with the proper funding needed for his or her research to succeed, then the institution may not be the best fit for that investigator. For junior investigators whose research does not require expensive up-front costs, the start-up package will most likely be smaller, but still needs to be sufficient to meet that investigator's needs. It is helpful for the junior investigator to know what they need for success before they enter the negotiation process.

### **The Nuts and Bolts of Negotiating**

Negotiating for a position within an academic or research setting is an iterative process. It must first be recognized that a verbal offer has no standing with any institution, and so one may negotiate orally or by E-mail, but it is not until a written offer comes signed by the appropriate institution officials that there can be assurances that the verbal agreements or E-mail agreements have permanency. It may be that the candidate gets the first offer that needs little to no modifications, but it should be recognized that institutions are prepared to carefully consider a candidate's counteroffer, particularly when the needs are well-framed. This means that when a candidate is considering the initial offer (and later modifications), he or she should assess each item and decide which aspects of the offer will foster success and which ones will impede it. It is important to go beyond the words and have a conversation about each point of the letter so that the candidate can fully understand what is being offered and avoid misunderstandings. Also know that it is acceptable to ask about what is flexible and what is not. When responding to an offer, the candidate should give clear and concise rationale for the proposed changes framed around the language of success. For example, if the candidate desires to submit a career development award during the first year and the teaching load for the first year is three courses with all of these being completely new to the candidate, the candidate should request a reduction in teaching load during the negotiation process if he/she determines that the teaching load will make the grant submission deadline unachievable. If the candidate asks for the reduction without providing a well-reasoned justification, he or she is not likely to have the request granted. Keep in mind that institutions cannot always



agree to certain terms even with a sound argument in light of broader department or institution factors; however, a well-justified request might be taken more seriously. If an institution has no flexibility on an issue the candidate believes is critical, or even very important, it may be that the institution is not the right one for that candidate.

In addition to how a candidate frames his or her requests, the format used (E-mail or phone) also affects the success of a negotiation. Many junior investigators are more comfortable with negotiating by email and there are benefits to this approach. Although, we all recognize that emails can be misconstrued, the brevity does not allow for easy clarification, and intent cannot always be gleaned from the style of how a busy person might relay messages. An important benefit of email is that it allows investigators the time to reflect about various aspects of the offer, but also allows time to solicit advice and guidance from mentors and other trusted advisors as E-mails can be shared confidentially. It is important to know, however, that many situations arise where at least part of the negotiation takes place over the phone. When that happens, the candidate should prepare questions and requests in advance; the candidate should be careful not to commit to any terms before assessing the information fully and requesting a follow-up phone call for clarification. To receive the same benefits as a negotiation that takes place via E-mail, the candidate should outline the phone discussion and terms of the agreement via email and request confirmation.

Another critical topic that affects the success of a negotiation is the timing a junior investigator chooses in bringing up important issues that impact his or her ability to accept an institution's offer. This includes topics such as spousal hires or childcare needs. It is important for a junior investigator to be transparent about these issues and to bring them up early in the process, particularly when an institution's ability to meet the request involves bringing other parties into the negotiation. As previously stated, it is critical for a junior investigator to recognize his or her value and to be confident that the institution will do what it can to accommodate the request. It is rare for a junior investigator to make a request never broached by candidates in the past. The way that the institution responds to certain requests provides valuable information and context about whether the institution is a good fit for the investigator. If, for example, there is a day care center on campus and the junior investigator has a young child that he or she would want to enroll there, then the junior investigator should make the request to be put on the list for a spot for his or her child at the time the faculty member arrives.

### What Is Actually Negotiable?

The short answer to this is that it varies based on the institution. As discussed earlier, entering a negotiation with as much accurate information as possible makes it easier to know the institution's benchmarks and where they have the most flexibility. For example, it is rare for any of the details of the benefits package to be negotiable and some institutions have very little flexibility in terms of salary. However, with that being said, a junior investigator should not be shy about asking for what he or she feels is important for success. When an institution makes its initial offer, it should include salary, benefits, teaching requirements, space, available resources, travel money, expectations, and start-up funds. Institutions also will

include terms that are specific to the position or the institution, such as summer salary or lab space. Depending on the institution, it may be up to the junior investigator to introduce other terms such as research or teaching assistants, specific equipment needs, or additional travel or professional development funds. A junior investigator also can make requests such as joint appointments or access to specific resources on campus (for example, equipment owned by another department or investigator). If these are the things that are necessary for a junior investigator to get established at the institution, then the investigator needs to ask for them. Remember these requests should be framed around contributions to success as a faculty member and the ability of the junior investigator to contribute to the institution. It is imperative for the junior investigator to be clear about why each request is important. It also is important for junior investigators not to be afraid of hearing the word "no." It may be that an institution is unable to respond favorably to every request that a junior investigator makes during the negotiation process, but an investigator can learn valuable information from both what the institution can and cannot provide and the manner that the institution handles the requests.

### Do Not Forget About the Long-term Support and Resources

For junior investigators who are considering tenure-track positions, it is vital to clearly understand the tenure rules of the institution. Faculty candidates should inquire about the tenure and promotion guidelines during the interview phase (and institutions should have no problem providing these to you) and take the time to thoroughly read these materials before accepting a position. Pay attention to details such as the maximum number of years, the metrics for tenure, the earliest that a faculty member can apply, and what happens to faculty members who do not get tenure. If the details of the tenure and promotion process are unclear, do not hesitate to ask for clarity as these guidelines will be critically important to the future success of all investigators at that institution.

While most junior investigators inquire about the tenure and promotion guidelines, they may not necessarily think to look at the fine print on an institution's policies on things such as sabbaticals, short-term and long-term disability, and maternity or paternity leave. While these issues may not be deal breakers, asking for these guidelines or bringing them up during the negotiation process can result in an important teachable moment for a junior investigator who is seriously considering accepting an institution's offer.

One set of factors that can easily be overlooked during an early career negotiation is how the institution supports its faculty members as they transition to senior faculty members and, ultimately, retirees. While issues such as retirement contributions and college tuition reimbursement for children may not be at the top of a junior investigator's list of priorities, they should not be overlooked. For example, college tuition becomes more expensive every year so an institution that offers this as part of their benefits package could have a tremendous impact for faculty members who have or are planning to have children. Academic careers progress over decades so how the institution structures these aspects of its benefits package will become increasingly important the longer an investigator remains at the institution.

## At the End of the Day, It Is Really About a Shared Vision

Do not lose sight of the fact that the goal at the end of this long and potentially complicated negotiation process is for the junior investigator to become colleagues with the person or persons on the other side of the negotiation. Throughout the process, a junior investigator needs to gather as much information as he or she can and continuously assess whether the institution can provide the resources and work environment that are needed for success. If a particular amount of laboratory space or start-up budget is critical to the success of the investigator's research program and the institution is unable to provide those resources, perhaps that institution is not the best fit. It is important for a junior investigator to remember that he or she is interviewing the institution throughout the hiring process and this remains true during the negotiation stage. Ultimately, if the junior investigator, the

department, and the institution share a vision for the faculty member's short and long-term success, then the negotiation process will result in an offer that all parties perceive as laying the groundwork for a long and productive academic career.

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No potential conflicts of interest were disclosed.

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