Securing a Faculty Position: A Practical Guide for Residents, Fellows, Junior Faculty, and Their Mentors

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Applying for a faculty position can appear to be a daunting project for many residents, fellows, and junior faculty due, in large part, to the lack of readily available information on the process of interviewing and negotiating for faculty appointment in academic medicine. Although this process may seem mystifying to first-time applicants, it has a structure. This article discusses the framework of the application process and recommends an action plan from initial contact to acceptance of an offer. Each step of the process is discussed. Guidelines are provided to assist applicants and their mentors to successfully manage these important steps.

KEY WORDS: academic; employment; faculty; faculty development; jobseeking; mentoring; negotiation; residents; fellows

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Securing a faculty position is a major milestone for physicians seeking a career in academic medicine. There is little formal guidance for individuals entering this phase of their careers and most trainees find themselves confused and at a disadvantage when applying for academic positions. Differences in the recruiting and hiring process between academic institutions and the private sector add to confusion for the applicants. This article informs applicants of the structure of the academic recruitment process and provides strategies for interviewing and negotiation. The information also provides a framework for mentors, advisors, and program directors as they assist residents, fellows, and junior faculty members in identifying and obtaining the faculty position for which the applicant is best suited. Mentors who are knowledgeable about the recruitment process are more capable of guiding trainees through the various tasks that ultimately will result in obtaining a satisfying position in academic medicine.

THE PROCESS

The structure of the interviewing and hiring process is similar at most academic centers in the United States, although each institution has its unique procedures. The process can be divided into 6 steps: 1) preparation phase, 2) initial contact, 3) first interview, 4) subsequent interviews and negotiation, 5) the offer letter, and 6) hiring/acceptance. It is important that the potential job applicant be cognizant of the content and process of each step in order to maximize the possibility of obtaining the ideal position.

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The Preparation Phase

Before the initial contact phase, applicants should assess themselves. What are their academic interests?[1,2] Are they seeking full- or part-time employment?[3] Which is more appropriate, a tenure-track, clinical-track, or research-track position? Are there geographic, economic, or family constraints that need to be addressed during the interviewing process? Once framing the type of position sought is complete, applicants should begin collecting information on possible positions. Is there an abundance of positions available in their area or is there limited availability? It is important to find out as much information as possible about the position for which the applicant is applying. Information can be gathered by both formal and informal methods. Commonly used resources include faculty handbooks, institutional brochures, and position job-offer descriptions. Increasingly, academic departments have websites that are easily accessed. Faculty, staff, and friends with direct or indirect knowledge of the programs under consideration are valuable sources of information and should be sought and used whenever possible.

Applicants frequently underestimate their strengths and thus enter the job search at a disadvantage. Applicants should be aware of their particular personal characteristics that may make them extremely valuable candidates. Current knowledge base, academic focus, skill set, board eligibility, and certification are strengths trainees frequently devalue. Frank and open discussions with mentors, advisors, or program directors may provide applicants with insights regarding their unique areas of strength. Applicants may also benefit from discussions with a senior faculty member who is knowledgeable about the applicant from a different specialty or subspecialty area. In addition, by addressing these issues before starting the process, applicants can learn ways of talking about their particular skills, which will benefit them later in the process.

Applicants should prepare a cover letter, curriculum vitae (CV), and resume to send to potential employers. The CV is the complete and comprehensive academic history of the applicant. It includes several key sections, including education, previous employment, membership in academic organizations, grants, contracts, awards, publications, and presentations. The institution where the applicant is based usually has a prescribed format for the CV. Other faculty are usually willing to share examples of their CVs with colleagues. Because it is so comprehensive, the CV is generally several pages in length.

A resume is shorter, usually 1–2 pages, and highlights the applicant in a somewhat different light. It focuses on work experience, education, and skills and is particularly position focused. The resume or cover letter usually begins with a statement about the individual's career objective and highlights experiences rather than coursework. The resume uses action verbs and bullet points, with the most important information at the top. Whereas CVs are generally written chronologically, resumes may vary in their temporal format. The applicant can tailor the resume to fit the skills necessary for the position sought. In academic medicine, the cover letter is usually used instead of a resume. Thus, the elements of the resume can often be incorporated into a cover letter. The cover letter should be specific about the position being sought, and it should state the applicant's specific interests and unique qualifications.

The preparation phase is an ongoing process. The CV should always be current. Thus, the CV should be reviewed and updated on a frequent basis. Include the date of the review on the CV document to note its currency. Establishing a pattern for reviewing and revising the CV and resume is an important strategy for individuals seeking to pursue a career in academe.

The preparation phase also provides the applicant with the opportunity to develop some talking points and brief stories to emphasize the uniqueness of his or her experience and why that would be of benefit to the recruiting institution. The talking points should address the specific knowledge or skill set possessed by the applicant. Each point should be tied to a brief story that explains how the particular attribute was used in a past situation and why it would be an asset for the prospective position. After reviewing materials about the department and school, applicants should also prepare a short list of questions to ask during the interview phase.

In addition to the review of CVs, cover letters, and resumes, the advisor or mentor can play an important role by reviewing the talking points, brief stories, and interview questions. When practical, mock interviews that are audio- or videotaped afford the applicant the opportunity to experience the interview process in a safe and supportive environment. The constructive criticism provided during the mock interview feedback session can assist the applicant in focusing on areas of strength and areas that need more refinement.

Initial Contact

The initial contact with the hiring program may occur as a result of a variety of circumstances, including responding to a position posting at a meeting, a journal listing, an e-mail listing, or personal contact. Position descriptions may be listed in general or discipline-specific journals or on websites. Most academic medical center libraries subscribe to *Academic Physician and Scientist* (www.acphysci.com),[4] which is an excellent source of information concerning positions in academe. Personal contacts, especially from department chairs and division directors, are other sources of information for discipline-specific positions. If an applicant is interested in a particular region of the country or a specific institution, asking his or her division director to make an initial inquiry is a good method of discovering if a position exists or could be created.

An employment firm that specializes in seeking individuals for academic positions may contact applicants. Individuals working for these firms are frequently referred to as headhunters. They may seek out potential faculty members and ask them to consider submitting their CVs for positions that have been listed with the service. If an applicant is hired through this route, the employer pays a fee to the agency. Many institutions employ such agencies when recruiting deans, department chairs, or division directors, but under certain circumstances, may use an agency for junior-level faculty recruitments.

When responding to a personal contact or advertisement about a position, a cover letter, CV, and resume should be forwarded to the designated person. The cover letter is a brief statement, usually less than 2 pages in length, that introduces the applicant. The first section gives the name of the applicant and current title or position. Information may be provided describing how the applicant became aware of the job offering. The specific position being sought should be included in this section. The second section generally provides specific information describing the applicant's unique qualifications for the position. Information explaining why the position appears to be a good match for the applicant may be included here. The last section usually presents a brief summary of the first 2 sections and a statement of desire to learn more about the position and begin the interview process.

The interview process includes information gathering and provides both parties with the opportunity to create a basis for communication and define the dimensions of their negotiation. Prior to beginning the interview circuit, candidates should be well advised to take one of the inventories that assess individual tendencies for negotiating styles such as collaborating, avoiding, competing, compromising, or accommodating. Awareness of one's own tendencies, preferences, and styles of communication can be a valuable asset. It is also beneficial to be able to recognize communication strategies used by interviewers. This process can help determine the likelihood the applicant and recruiting department might fit and avoid expenditures of time and money on positions that are unlikely

First Interview Dos and Don'ts

Do	Don't
• Do your homework	• Focus on salary
• Address the philosophical fit	• Plan to make any commitments except another visit if offered
• Identify the key people to meet	• Trust all first impressions
• Have an academic and personal focus	• Close options
• Consider nonacademic factors, especially significant others	

to match expectations. For individuals who wish to learn more about negotiation, numerous references are available, including shorter works by Fisher and Ury[5] and Stone et al[6] and more in depth offerings by Marcus et al[7] and Nierenberg.[8] Most sources indicate that interactions that foster collaboration are more likely to result in mutually satisfactory outcomes than are interactions based on avoidance or competition. CPP, Inc,[9] a provider of research-validated assessment and training tools, is a source that offers various products on individual development, including the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* and the *Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument.*

Prior to accepting an invitation for an interview, the applicant should have a clear understanding of financing for the visit. What is the procedure for payment of transportation, lodging, and per diem? Some programs make the arrangements for the candidate. Other programs may expect the candidate to pay for transportation and lodging in advance and be reimbursed later. If the candidate incurs expenses, information should be obtained in advance defining what items are allowable and the procedures for reimbursement.

First Interview

Most institutions view the first interview as exploratory in nature. It provides the applicant and the institution an opportunity to determine the rightness of fit. Once a first interview is established, candidates should identify a few people that they would like to meet during the visit. Potential mentors, future colleagues, and professional friends are among those who should be considered for inclusion. First impressions are important. Therefore, candidates are encouraged to be as informed as possible about the recruiting institution and desired position. The candidate should be knowledgeable about the person responsible for the recruitment. During the initial interview, questions generally are more informational in nature, usually do not emphasize specific details, such as space (office, clinical, or laboratory) or compensation (salary and fringe benefits), and are best focused on the applicant's academic goals. It is important for the applicant to clearly express the nature of the position he or she is seeking as well as to determine the expectations of the recruiting institution. Some guidelines for the first interview are listed in the Table.

Nonacademic factors, such as the time frame for the decision, work environment, work ethic, personal and family opportunities, lifestyle options, housing costs, and program goals are among the topics frequently covered during the initial visit. Some programs will ask applicants to give a presentation during the first interview, while other programs prefer to request a presentation at a subsequent visit. Prior to the visit, the applicant should determine the type of audience anticipated to attend, the desired format, the length of time for the presentation, and amount of time for questions. The applicant should also ascertain who will be responsible for the introduction and what information is expected in advance.

It is important that applicants present themselves in a positive manner. Residents and fellows can bring cutting-edge knowledge and skills to a program that can help the recruiting institution advance its academic mission. Thus, applicants should emphasize their unique knowledge and skill sets and how these will be applied to specific academic goals. Applicants should be able to explain how their skill sets and goals will benefit the recruiting program.

During the interview process, some questions are acceptable, while others, such as age and marital status, are potentially unacceptable. Applicants should respectfully decline to answer those questions that they deem unacceptable. Additional information about the legality of specific questions can be obtained from the applicant's local Human Relations Office or Office of Affirmative Action.

Couples searches provide unique opportunities and challenges. When possible, it is advantageous for both members of a couple to arrange their first visit simultaneously; however, this possibility may vary by institution and positions sought. Some institutions may wait until after the visit of one of the couple to determine the viability of pursuing that individual prior to inviting the second member of the couple. In the early phases of a dual search, many department chairmen or division directors prefer to handle the searches individually. The substantive issues relative to a dual search may be deferred to a later visit. A final commitment should await a subsequent interview if granted.

Prior to the end of the first visit, the applicant should request a timetable indicating when and how he or she should expect to receive follow-up communication and what, if any, additional information they may need to forward to the program. A thank you letter should be sent to the search-committee chair. The thank you letter provides an opportunity to briefly mention your personal appraisal of the program and potential goodness of fit.

This is another opportunity for the trainee and mentor to review the application packet and update materials as indicated. Based on experiences at the initial interview, this may be an opportune time for another mock interview with constructive feedback both to critique the initial interview and to prepare the trainee for subsequent interviews.

Subsequent Interviews and Negotiations

The applicant should view the invitation for second and subsequent interviews positively. The second visit means the recruiting institution moved beyond the exploratory phase and has a definite interest in the applicant. Thus, the subsequent interview tends to be more focused than the initial interview. If a presentation was not given during the first visit, most institutions would expect a presentation during this visit.

If not discussed during the first visit, most medical schools have at least 2 academic tracks. The interviewer should highlight the differences between tracks. If it is possible to shift between tracks, the criteria should be given. The criteria for appointment and promotion in a specific track are institution specific. Therefore, it is incumbent that the interviewees be aware of the criteria for appointment and promotion at each institution to which they are applying. The appointment and promotion process must comply with federal, state, and institutional affirmative action guidelines.

Discussions concerning research or clinical start-up packages should be further developed with a mutual understanding of expectations. A detailed description of the applicant's proposed clinical, educational, or research trajectory should be a key component of the visit. Issues addressed at this and subsequent visits include mentoring, protected time, space, compensation, academic title and rank, support staff, and faculty-development opportunities. If the recruiting institution has not already identified a mentor, the applicant should attempt to identify the best research or clinical mentor and obtain a commitment. Issues concerning equipment or other resources that are required and those items that can be shared should be addressed. For example, are animals or other resources needed for the applicant's research endeavors? Will start-up support be provided? If so, there should be a clear understanding between the 2 parties as to what constitutes start-up support. This should specify how much funding and the duration of this support. Relocation costs should also be addressed. What moving expenses are covered? These arrangements vary from institution to institution.

For individuals wishing to pursue a clinical- or research-track position, clinical service and teaching responsibilities should be addressed. Any restrictions concerning participation of nontenured and tenure-track faculty in voting privileges or academic activities, such as sabbatical leaves, should be explored at this time.

At most institutions, detailed discussions concerning the compensation package occur during the second visit. The faculty practice plan and compensation arrangements vary from institution to institution.[2,10] The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) has information about faculty salaries by degree, rank, gender, specialty, and region, which may be useful to applicants[11] and may be available at their institutional library or dean's office or ordered from the AAMC. Most disciplines also have a national association of departmental administrators who have aggregate data on salaries, which may be more current than the AAMC data. Departmental administrators at the applicant's institution are often willing to share select information from this data. Applicants should be clear on the source of their salary. Is the funding from a single source or are there multiple sources? How is compensation determined? Are there salary incentives or penalties for meeting or failing to meet the performance standards? Any other institution- or department-specific information concerning compensation should be clearly addressed at this visit. The promotion process should be explained.

To determine the goodness of fit, the partner or spouse is generally invited along during this visit, although in some circumstances, the invitation is extended as part of the initial visit. This provides an opportunity to explore real estate, schools, and other community resources. The expense of the spouse's transportation and lodging is generally borne by the host institution, though this needs to be clarified in advance of the visit. The second visit also provides the partner with the opportunity to explore potential employment options in the local community. Some institutions will assist in a job search, but there is no standard for this across academic institutions. If spousal employment is an important consideration, the applicant should address it at the time of the invitation to return for a second visit, so that arrangements for this can be facilitated.

The hiring institution generally initiates a series of communications once it is determined that the candidate would be a good match for the program. While the exact steps of the process will vary by institution, the process may include telephone, e-mail, and letter communication with the applicant to formalize details of the start-up package. Issues of laboratory space, research support, and duration of start-up support are negotiated during this process. These communications do not constitute a formal offer letter, but all are important to establishing a mutual agreement concerning the components of the start-up package. These communications are generally more detailed for individuals seeking tenure- and research-track positions.

The Offer Letter

When both parties agree on the content of the start-up package and any items addressed in subsequent negotiations, a final formal offer letter is sent. In some cases, a faculty vote is required prior to sending an offer letter. The formal offer letter is a document issued by the recruiting institution stating the particulars of the position as negotiated. The offer letter is generally used in academic medicine in lieu of a contract. It should address issues of position description, responsibilities, compensation, and fringe benefits. These items should have been discussed or presented in information provided to the applicant during prior interviews. In many cases, the offer letter will refer to specific communications discussing arrangements for the start-up package. There should be no surprises in the offer letter. The offer letter may or may not provide an opportunity for additional negotiation, depending on the institution and the content area under discussion. A firm time limit for acceptance of the offer is generally included. If both parties have proceeded in good faith, it is anticipated that the letter of offer meets the expectations of the institution and applicant. The applicant should review the offer letter with individuals familiar with the academic hiring process. Individuals capable of providing critical review include the applicant's division director and the department chair. Many institutions have staff members, legal aides, or lawyers who have expertise in reviewing contracts and who are available to provide an independent review of the letter and offer an objective critique of its specific elements.

Hiring/Acceptance

Upon receipt of the letter of hire, the applicant should, as with the letter of offer, review it with knowledgeable individuals. A prompt response, positive or negative, should be provided in writing, either by signing the letter or by a separate acceptance letter. In addition, a personal call is a usual part of the interaction. With written acceptance and personal contact, the applicant has successfully completed the recruitment process at the department level. In many institutions, other administrative units, such as the dean's office, provost, and board of trustees, must approve the recruitment packet. Approval is usually confirmational, but it may take several weeks to a few months before the official letter of appointment is received.

CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of searching for a position in academic medicine is matching the applicant, with his or her unique knowledge and skills, with a program that will provide a framework to nurture and develop those talents into a successful academic career. Applicants who have familiarized themselves with the interview and negotiation process are more likely to be successful in their quest for an appointment that recognizes their individual strengths and provides an opportunity for growth. Mentors and advisors are critically important in sharing their knowledge about the process to facilitate their trainee's transition to a rewarding faculty position. An application and recruitment process is considered successful when both parties are satisfied with the agreement and empowered by their relationship.

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