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Administrator's advice to professors about seeking and using counter-offers (essay)

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On occasion, faculty members ask for my perspective on how counter-offers work. They may have been invited to apply for a position elsewhere, have dual-career issues, or have simply seen an intriguing job posting and are wondering how the university would respond if they had an external offer.

Our conversations have revealed that misinformation is rampant. Misperceptions range from believing that any external offer will generate an automatic mirror-image counter-offer to thinking that such matters should be raised only with a chair or dean when one has an external offer firmly in hand.

In this article, I hope to provide an administrator's perspective and give faculty some general guidelines to keep in mind. Individual circumstances and local practice can vary greatly, so what I say should be taken only as a starting point. Talking with a trusted, experienced administrator (e.g., chair, dean, head of academic HR) with current information at your own institution is the best way to learn more about how these issues are handled where you work.

Above all, only seek an offer for a position that you might genuinely be interested in accepting. First, you should not waste your own time, or that of the other institution, on a "pretend" application. Wasting your own time is illogical, and wasting another institution's is dishonest and may come back to haunt you.

Second, unforeseen circumstances may propel you to accept the offer, even if you had not originally thought you would be likely do so. Third, if your home institution has the sense that your interest in the external position is not genuine, it will be less likely to counter-offer to help make your current position more congenial. Acting ethically and working to arrange a choice among acceptable outcomes is always the best course.

Once convinced that the external option sounds genuinely appealing, ask yourself why. After all, moving is disruptive and expensive. What aspects of the other position would remedy some defect in your current situation or open up new opportunities for career progression? Are there any possibilities for achieving those aims by staying on your campus? These are questions that those who will be interviewing you for the new position or attempting to retain you in your current position will expect you to have thought about. Moreover, your institution's perception of these matters will likely influence its response to an external offer.

Roughly speaking, a faculty member might be attracted by a position at another institution because it offered one or more of the following sorts of benefits:

- Resources (e.g., salary, rank, space, students, or funds)
- Roles (e.g., a position as a group leader, center director, or chair)
- Environment (e.g. institutional mission, denominational affiliation, or location)

While these are not mutually exclusive categories, they do provide a useful framework for discussing an institution's likely response.

Let us assume that the faculty member in question is performing well and that his or her area of teaching or research expertise is valued at the home institution. And for the sake of simplicity, we will also assume there is no overt academic politics in play.

Suppose the offer primarily involves resources, because the two institutions are of similar type (e.g., both are private liberal arts colleges, or technical institutes, or regional master's level universities) and the faculty member would have the same role at either place. Then the home institution will perceive that it has a chance of retaining the faculty member by finding some resources to offer in return.

Making a resource-based counter-offer is generally in the current institution's economic and academic interest. Hiring and training new faculty is expensive and risky, and losing a senior faculty member can adversely impact a department's reputation and effectiveness; thus, retaining proven faculty is usually a priority. The precise size of the counter-offer will be influenced by the current budgetary climate, faculty salary scales, and local practices. A counter-offer that is not identical to the external offer should not automatically be taken to mean that the home institution does not value the faculty member.

On the other hand, suppose the offer primarily involves roles. The home institution may not have a comparable role to offer (e.g., there may not be an open directorship); when that is the case, the institution generally makes that clear. Then a smart home institution will try to proffer some resources and encourage the faculty member to see the advantages of remaining in his or her present role. Again, the size of the counter-offer will be influenced by local fiscal constraints and practices. A proactive institution could also engage the faculty member in a conversation about professional development and leadership opportunities on its campus, to show that appealing new roles may become available over time without requiring a disruptive move.

If the offer primarily involves environment, the home institution may be in a bit of a bind. Its size, mission, student population, denominational affiliation, and location are already fixed and not open to alteration. If these sorts of qualities are what is attracting the individual to consider a move, that stymies the home institution's bargaining power to some extent. Moreover, if the new institution is smaller or less affluent, the home institution may feel that talking about resources would be irrelevant because resources are evidently not at the top of the faculty member's list of priorities. When environment is driving the faculty member to consider an external offer, the home institution's response is likely to be much more variable.

In some sense, the worst guide to what you can expect comes from rumors about the kind of counter-offer someone else on your campus allegedly received. Individual circumstances vary so greatly that you have no way of knowing whether the situations were comparable: How senior was the other person? How critical to their department's mission? What were the details of the external offer? Why was the person considering a move? Were dual-career or work-life issues

playing a role?

Chances are, these will be details you are not privy to, so you will not be able to extrapolate reliably from someone else's experience. Moreover, at institutions where academic politics plays a significant role in such decisions (e.g., if the influence wielded by the person advocating for your retention is a large factor), then past performance becomes an even weaker guide to future outcomes.

Again, if a home institution gets the sense that the faculty member is merely trying to "play a game" and extract more resources without actually intending to consider the external offer seriously, the home institution may simply refuse to play. I have seen cases where this happened, particularly when the new institution was smaller, much less "prestigious" or located in a less affluent region or country. The faculty member can be left in a rather awkward position, feeling as if perhaps there is now some pressure to move, even if he or she is not certain the move is the right one. I have also seen cases where administrators at the home institution mistakenly concluded that an individual was unlikely to move because a dual-career situation was involved; e.g., they assumed that a more senior partner would be unwilling to follow a more junior one to a new institution. Because perceptions, accurate or not, do matter, it is best to communicate very clearly with your home institution about your interests and priorities if you are entertaining an external offer and hoping for a counter-offer.

Finally, what should you do if you are simply considering whether to apply for a tempting position elsewhere? Speak with your mentor(s) to get their perspective on how the other position could impact your career. Speak with your partner or a close friend for perspective on how this might affect your life. And assuming that your group leader, chair or dean is an experienced and trustworthy administrator, having a confidential conversation about the attractions of that opportunity can also be valuable. It will remind them that proactive retention measures are important and may lead to brainstorming about how to improve your current job.

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