



You've Been Offered The Chair...But Do You Know Enough to Take It?

BY DAVID J. BACHRACH

You've been in a few departmental chair searches over the past 18 months and have gotten close but never received an offer. You have just had a phone conversation with the dean of ABC Medical School, who said that you are their preferred and sole remaining candidate and has invited you back for a fourth and final three-day visit. She has told you that it is her expectation that she will extend a formal offer and expects that you will make a commitment of intent before the visit ends.

You have been impressed that the search has been better run than others in which you have participated and, even though it has taken nearly six months to get to this point, the institution seems to be focused, timely, and thorough in the search process and has kept you informed all along the way.

As requested, you have submitted a carefully thought-out vision statement for the department, accompanied by a comprehensive statement of expectations and resource needs. The dean said that all were impressed with your submission, and she intends for you to go over your plan with her leadership team early in your visit; she will go over a final draft offer with you at the beginning of the third day of your visit. The preliminary agenda for the visit shows that she has blocked out three hours for that meeting.

The dean has invited you to communicate with the school's associate dean for administration and finance (A/DA&F) concerning any other information you feel you may need prior to next month's visit.

The information you have received throughout the search process has been helpful and quite comprehensive, but you are now wondering what questions you haven't asked, and what further information you should have in order to make a firm and final decision.

You are understandably anxious. You know that the dean will want an answer, probably on the spot. What will you need to

David J. Bachrach has more than 35 years of experience in academic medicine. For the past 10 years he has been providing leadership coaching services to physicians in academic medical centers and teaching hospitals. E-mail: PhysXCoach@aol.com; phone: 303-497-0844; Web site: www.PhysXCoach.com.

know in order to be able to say yes—or walk away if you are uncertain?

Preparing for the Final Visit

Take a deep breath; what you are feeling is physiologically normal. This is a significant, life-changing decision that most people go through only a few times in their career. Here are some things you can do to help you answer the question, "Is this the right job for me?"

How Much Information Do I Need to Make a Decision?

The balance point in the search/recruitment process has now moved slightly in your favor; you now have the offer and you can be a bit bolder in your requests for information and access to people. There is rarely as much information available to you as you would like, however. In our imperfect world we depend in part on trust—trust that those with whom we have been dealing and will depend on at our new institution are telling us the truth (the *whole* truth). Your confidence in the commitments of others can be enhanced by taking a number of simple steps.

First, lay out your final visit as you would like and get in touch with the search coordinator as soon as possible to ask for the availability of the people you want to see, and the order in which you would prefer to see them. Since you are going to be a department chair, be sure to include one-on-one visits with the chairs who are the power brokers at the institution. Also be

sure to include chairs who have been recruited by the incumbent dean in the past three years. Nothing will tell you more about how you are likely to be treated following your arrival better than how she has treated others regarding the honoring of commitments and reasonableness in addressing real needs not identified during the search process.

Plan to meet with the search committee, but this time you will be leading the brief meeting. You might say something like this: "I want to thank you for having sufficient confidence in me to advance me as one of the preferred candidates. It is now up to me to demonstrate that your judgment was well founded. I will work hard to make you feel good about that decision. We now have a contract. I will need to know that I can call on you once I arrive to serve as touchstones and advisors as I encounter issues and obstacles that are not readily solved. I will be looking to many of you to build coalitions and partnerships with me as I implement my vision for the department. I trust I can count on every one of you."

You will want to spend considerable time with the A/DA&F, both on the phone ahead of time and during that initial visit. Most deans and their A/D A&Fs have a style by which they negotiate chair packages. I have witnessed various levels of clarity (read, "ambiguity") in offer letters. Clear is better, comprehensive is better, aligned with the strategic plan for the institution and the department—and your proposal, which they viewed as impressive, is best.

You may wish to propose to the A/DA&F that: "The outcome I seek from these discussions/negotiations is an offer document built on the premise that the resources provided will be sufficient in magnitude, and available in such a time frame, that will allow me to fulfill the program that I have described and that the dean has embraced." There is an opportunity for you to be a bit self-effacing by acknowledging that this is the first time

you have negotiated a package of this magnitude and that you know that the dean and A/DA&F may have done this many times in the past. Further, that while you know *what* you will do, generally *how* you will do it, and largely *what it will take* in people/space/equipment/technology resources to accomplish it, you don't really know all that is already extant at the institution; what resources you will need that might be shared with others (here, the institution's culture concerning shared resources will come into play as will the relationship you can develop with other chairs concerning same), and how much things cost (especially space remodeling costs).

The A/DA&F is likely to be more expert, and/or have access to such information, than you are. Appealing to his or her appreciation for your understandable lack of experience at this level may help to bind your relationship ("I am counting on you to be straight with me; you are the expert; you do this all the time; don't let me down").

You will undoubtedly get advice from friends and colleagues concerning the negotiation process. Often there are two things told to people in your position at this time: (1) Whatever you do, get it now and get it in writing! and (2) More is better—and a lot more is better still (sometime referred to as "package envy"). Here are some things you *really* need to know:

- ❖ The offer needs to be "sufficient" —not necessarily large, just enough to get the job done with a small margin for error. Accordingly, it's the program description that you have put forward, the timeline for its accomplishment (including some important milestones over a five- to 10-year period) and the measures of success that need to be pinned down in writing more than the precise resources you will receive (see below).
- ❖ You will not (cannot) anticipate every thing you will need to be successful over the next five to 10 years. As such, it is more important that you and the dean (and her senior support people) agree in writing that, within reason, resources needed to be successful that are not committed to as a part of the offer will be provided in the future, to the degree that the institution can respond at the time. It is very important that you and the dean mutually agree with the principle that "If



"Essential is a clear characterization of the department five and 10 years hence [and] a sense of trust with the dean and senior staff that resources will be sufficient to accomplish these goals."

I lead the department to a level of performance equal to or greater than that which you described in your offer letter (and I committed to in my acceptance letter), will I have access to additional resources to then take the department to the next level, as I will describe in my rolling five-year vision statement and action plan?" Most deans will welcome such a discussion (maybe, in part, because it is not terribly likely that they will be dean five years from now) as it speaks to your focus on accomplishment and not just a large package of resources for the sake of bragging rights.

Most packages describe incremental resources: How much (positions/space for various functions/dollars) will you add to the department's resource base (recurring dollars have a different value than nonrecurring, one-time funds) as a condition of my recruitment? The best offer packages describe *all* resources available to the new chair, those that now exist and those that will be added as a part of this commitment. Here are some things to ask for as you prepare for your visit:

- ❖ A list of all faculty, by subdiscipline, rank, age (yes, you can ask this question) and any commentary on their likely duration of tenure with the institution. An existing funded position that is

vacant, or will likely become vacant, has the same value as a new position, assuming that the resources (base salary dollars/office and lab space/support staff/clinic space and OR time) remain with the department and the allocation/re-allocation remains within your authority.

- ❖ An inventory of all space in the department (including annotations about the condition of the space and its suitability to support the programs you have described) is essential before you start talking about incremental space or large nonrecurring dollar aliquots for remodeling or construction. A department with grossly out-of-date space will require a larger package for remodeling than one that will be occupying brand new/well-designed space upon your arrival.
- ❖ Spreadsheets of existing resources (separate ones for positions/space/equipment/recurring and nonrecurring funds) that begin with what now exists and what will be added, and when this will occur. This multidimensional matrix is complex and will likely have many footnotes explaining complex relationships and referencing institutional policies, procedures, practices, and principles.
- ❖ With these spreadsheets in hand, plan to visit with each of those who will be responsible to honoring these commitments. For example, the associate dean for research controls research space. Plan to go over the commitment for new (or retained) research space with him or her; walk the space together and see if the written assessment of its current condition is consonant with the intended need/use and/or whether the dollars allocated for upgrading the space for its intended use will get the job done. You might say: "I am not interested in how much money is in the package for remodeling, as I don't know what it costs in this institution/community to accomplish this task. All I want is your assurance that the amount allocated will be sufficient to get the job done in the time frame to which we have agreed."
- ❖ What you will want at the end of the visit is an offer that has the signoff of all parties who are in a position to commit each category of resources, a sense that they are in a position to know that they can

honor that commitment, and affirmation from those who have gone before you that they are so equipped and honorable.

- ❖ A compendium of policies/rules and practices regarding the retention of existing resources, getting new resources, the authority of the chair to allocate and reallocate resources, including the ability to reassign faculty and staff for cause (or without cause) from certain roles or access to certain resources, to adjust (reduce or increase) compensation levels, to reassign duties and space resources, and so on. I have found that an even modestly ambitious chair with a good and powerful vision can describe a program that will require resources that exceed the ability of the institution to fully meet those needs. So the ability/authority to apply existing resources to their highest and best use becomes an essential part of the armamentarium that you will need to be successful.

I have found that the rules that exist may not be the ones that are followed. Here is where it will be important to ask other chairs (especially recent hires) about what was said versus what is practiced (“They told me I could reduce nonproductive faculty salaries so that they were more aligned with the contribution that the faculty member was making—but when I tried to do so, I found out it has never been done successfully and the fact is, you can’t get rid of ‘dead wood’ around here”).

- ❖ I strongly recommend that you request both a financial and management audit of the department. A *financial audit* will

require an examination by a CPA of the department books and an attestation that the financial statements—the balance sheet (assets, liabilities, and equities or net worth) and income statement (revenue, less expenses, equals net operating income)—accurately reflect reality. A *management audit* calls for a review of policies, procedures, and practices that are actually followed by the department in the conduct of its activities. It should include financial procedures (such as cash controls in the clinic), as well as a review of research protocol controls, adherence to patient confidentiality policies (HIPAA), compliance with time-keeping and reporting requirements, and so on.

Anything you uncover from these audits, or during your first year of tenure, is likely the result of the behaviors of those who were there before you. Uncovering problems and addressing them will be viewed by most as your good management. After the first year, your failure to look for and discover problems that diminish the integrity or performance of the department represents an act of *omission*, in contrast to your knowingly sanctioning something that is wrong, which would be an act of *commission*. Both represent a failure of your management and leadership. You are best served by getting any problems out on the table and dealing with them as soon as possible. Unfortunately, it is not unusual to find deviations from good practices, up to and including outright fraud/theft, in our institutions. If it is present, get it rooted out

and let those who work with and for you know that you will not tolerate such behaviors and will act swiftly and deliberately ... and equitably regardless of position or rank ... if such problems are found.

- ❖ Last, you need to ask about the culture of the institution ...and not necessarily what people say they want it to be, but rather what it really is. Some institutions subscribe to the credo, “Each tub on its own bottom’ while others speak sincerely about collaboration (“We reward collaboration and cooperation with a greater willingness to make funds available to those who demonstrate better utilization of resources by sharing expensive assets”).

Conclusion

Few candidates will have as much information, or as much time, as they would like to make a commitment to their new position. Accordingly, key factors need to be in place, along with as many specifics as can be agreed to in advance. Essential is a clear characterization of the department five and 10 years hence; a sense of trust with the dean and senior staff that resources will be sufficient to accomplish these goals; an understanding of the culture, as well as policies and practices, of the institution, with the agreement that these are sufficient to allow you to sculpt the department as needed; and, last, that those who have come before you speak to the veracity and integrity of the people with whom you will deal, so you will know that what they say is what they mean, and what they do. ❖