

Campus



# Applying for an academic position in the US: the basics explained

Considering academic job opportunities in the US? Angela Douglas provides practical advice to help understand the application process and secure the right position

Early career research Career advice North America Feature article



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A successful application for an academic position at a higher education institution in the USA requires an understanding of the selection procedure: what the advertised job entails; how interviews are conducted; and how to negotiate before accepting the offer.

## Interpreting the job advertisement

Most academic positions are:

- **9-month contracts.** Salary covers the period from mid-August to mid-May, but it is paid equally across the 12 months. Up to three months of summer salary can be earned from other sources, such as paid summer teaching at the home institution or with private or not-for-profit organisations, or dedicated research time paid by research grants. Academics on a nine-month contract work through the year, whether or not they have supplementary summer salary. Note, 12-month contracts are rare at most institutions.
- **Full-time contracts,** ie 100 per cent for nine months or 12 months. Some positions pay less than 100 per cent and the academic is responsible for making up the shortfall from other sources.

## Tenure track

- Entry-level faculty positions (assistant professorships) are tenure track. This means that the assistant professor is evaluated over the first years after appointment (usually six years). Application for tenure involves the preparation of a **tenure package** that provides detailed evidence of exemplary performance in all aspects of the described position. If tenure is denied, the contract is terminated.
- Some institutions require tenure applications for senior academic appointments. These personnel are expected to prepare a full tenure package, either before or soon after appointment.
- A small – but increasing – number of academic appointments are not tenured. Performance is reviewed at regular intervals, usually every seven years, prior to renewal (or termination) of the contract.

## Responsibilities of the position: three special considerations

- Many advertised positions in the sciences are a **teaching-research split**. Responsibilities include formal teaching of undergraduate and/or graduate students, research training for students and postdoctoral staff, and a commitment to develop an independent research programme supported by extramural funding.
- Some positions [at land-grant universities](#) include **cooperative extension responsibilities**, which are communication of research-based knowledge about agriculture, sustainable environmental management, human nutrition and food safety to practitioners.
- At **primarily undergraduate institutions**, including liberal arts colleges, academic positions are primarily focused on teaching. Competitive applicants to these institutions generally have extensive teaching experience and a strong interest in innovative teaching methods.

## The selection procedure

Hiring new faculty is a lengthy process in the US. Two features differ substantially from the selection procedure in many other countries.

### 1. The search committee guides the selection procedure, but it does not make the final decision

The search committee comprises departmental faculty members and often a graduate student representative and an academic colleague from a different department.

The main responsibilities of the search committee are:

- To select three to five candidates for in-person interview. The chair of the search committee presents the recommended interview shortlist to departmental faculty, who – following discussion – may modify the shortlist.
- To rank the interviewed candidates based on the perceptions of committee members and feedback from departmental faculty, students and postdocs. The recommendations are discussed at a departmental faculty meeting, and faculty members vote. The final decision may be made at a higher level within the university, but the position is usually offered to the candidate who receives the majority of the departmental faculty votes.

**2. Each shortlisted candidate is interviewed over 1.5 to two days, at a different time from other candidates;** a candidate may have no idea of the opposition.

The interview includes:

- **Formal events:** a seminar describing the candidate's scholarship or research and/or a lecture for undergraduate students (especially at primarily undergraduate institutions). For many positions, especially in the sciences, interviewees also present a **chalk talk:** an hour of discussion with the departmental faculty about the candidate's research and teaching plans. A successful chalk talk demonstrates smart, creative ideas that match the advertised position and fit well to funding opportunities, from especially federal funding agencies.
- **Informal events:** the candidate meets individually with members of departmental faculty, a senior academic administrator (such as a dean or associate dean) and groups of graduate students and postdocs, and is often shown around the facilities.

**Interviewing for a US faculty position requires mental and physical stamina.** Expect a completely full schedule of meetings. Day one likely starts with a 7am breakfast with the chair of department and closes with an evening meal with five or six faculty that runs to 10pm. Day two will have a similar early start and close with the exit interview with the chair of department.

### Contract negotiations

The initial job offer is usually made by the chair of department, often by phone. This is followed by detailed negotiations primarily with the chair of department, who communicates with (and is often negotiating with) the decision-makers in university administration. All being well, the outcome is a **formal offer letter** that includes the start date, starting salary and, where relevant, details of the start-up package.

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**Academic salaries** in the US are mostly negotiated on an individual basis. Some universities publish their salary scales, while others provide average salary for different professorial ranks or provide no public information at all. Unionisation in higher education is patchy and entirely absent at many institutions.

**The start-up package** provides the funds for faculty in the sciences to set up a well-equipped laboratory and research programme. The sums involved can vary from less than \$100,000 (£74,000) to more than \$1 million, varying with institution, the cost of the candidate's research programme and the availability of other complementary institutional resources. The selected candidate generates a realistic start-up budget to support research personnel, consumables and essential equipment for an initial period; this document is the basis for negotiations. Laboratory renovation and the construction of specialised research facilities are usually funded separately.

A positive attitude, clarity about items that can (and cannot) be negotiated, and a commitment to solve discrepancies all promote a successful outcome of the negotiations.

**The formal offer letter.** Ensure that everything that has been negotiated is included and correct. If any information is missing or ambiguous, ask for a revised offer letter that includes or clarifies the outstanding issue.

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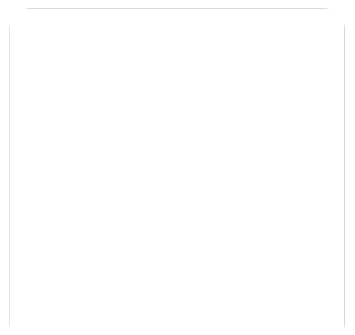
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