

Academia - What Every Junior Faculty Needs to Know: A Quiz

Angela C. C. Wang, MD

Most newly minted junior faculty members are unaware of the fundamental entrepreneurial nature of academics. They take commodities such as salary, space, and time for granted, not realizing that each is a limited resource that must be negotiated. Just as in business, alliances and collaborations facilitate success in an academic institution. I've often interviewed fellow applicants who want to go into academics to be clinician-educators. Most of them have spent their careers thus far being taught by clinician-educators, and their concept of an academic career is based on this model. But they usually don't have a clue as to the economics involved in generating their salaries.

In many research-based medical teaching institutions, teaching is a voluntary or highly underpaid activity. Still, the teaching must be done and committees must be filled. It seems a fact of academic life that these responsibilities are usually assigned to junior faculty struggling to establish their careers and salary sources. Junior faculty often assume that they are joining a team of equals and as team-players cheerfully accept whatever division and department chiefs ask them to do. But, for division directors and section chiefs who are struggling to balance budgets and cover service obligations, the long-term success of a junior faculty member is often not an immediate priority. Thus, it is up to the faculty person to ask the right questions. The following quiz was adapted from an email sent to UCSD faculty in April 2005 by the University of California, San Diego, Health Sciences Faculty Rights and Welfare Committee.

1. What is your academic series? In other words, what are the criteria for promotion for your series? For instance, in the University of California system, there are *five* professorial tracks, each with their own restrictions and criteria regarding salary stability, ability to compete for grants and other future funding sources, space assignment, ability to have graduate students, and retirement benefits. Interpretation of the series differs from campus to campus (1).

2. What is your salary and what is your source of salary support? There are a vast number of salary sources available to academic physicians. You need to know where your salary comes from and how vulnerable it is. FTE (full-time equivalent)? Research grants? Departmental funds? Clinical collections? Clinical trials? VA funds? Hospital funds? Faculty start-up packages often include a salary guarantee. Do you have a salary guarantee, if so, for how many years? What will happen if you have a salary shortfall after your guarantee ends? Who assumes responsibility for your time? Remember, everyone who pays you expects a piece of you, and it is up to you to make sure that you are not pulled apart or in too many directions. Be careful with joint appointments, e.g., between the VA and university. How does splitting your time and salary support ability to accrue vacation, sick leave, and retirement benefits (see Question 4). For young faculty wishing to start families, what policies are in place regarding maternity leave? How will you be paid during leave? Does this leave come out of your assigned clinical or research time? How does this affect your tenure clock?

3. Do you have formally assigned space, or will you be working in space assigned to another faculty member? Where is it located and how many square feet is it? Is the space paid for by grants or by the department? In other words, who owns the space? How vulnerable are you? If you work in someone else's space, understand that you depend on their good graces and fortune. Their priorities may change. They may lose funding. In either of those cases, you may be asked to move.

4. What is your APU (Academic Program Unit) and how does this affect your future retirement benefits? Since medical school faculty are often paid on a different scale than their university counterparts, institutions have devised various ways to account for these differences in terms of accruing retirement benefits. Do you know what the requirements of your institution(s) are in terms of being able to participate in their retirement programs? For instance, If you have VA funding, what is your university percentage and how does this affect your future university/VA retirement benefits?

5. What are your teaching responsibilities? Do you belong to a specific graduate program? Do you need to recruit graduate students from other programs? Realize that time for

teaching often comes out of time that might otherwise be spent on revenue-generating activities such as patient care. Will your salary be docked? (Believe me, this happens.)

6. Are you a member of organized research units? Organized research units can provide infrastructure and critical access to core equipment, computer facilities, and expertise in clinical trial design/analysis. Sharing and availability may be issues unless you are a member of the unit. What rights and duties are required for membership in these units? How easy is it to join?

7. What are your university service and committee requirements? This can be good or bad. Seek advice from senior faculty and/or your mentor to help you sort out requests and identify good committees for networking or facilitating your career development.

8. Who will be your mentor and advisor? For fellows and junior faculty, this is perhaps the most important decision you will make. As previously mentioned, you can't always depend on your division chief to make the most savvy decisions for you in terms advancing your career. In addition to a research advisor, it can be very useful to have one or more senior persons advise you on career development. Many institutions also have formal mentoring programs.

It can be traumatic and demoralizing to work hard for years doing what you think you ought to be doing, or doing what you are told to do, but then be informed that your salary and academic promotion are in jeopardy. To avoid this all-too-frequent scenario, you *must* understand how your job description matches (or doesn't match) your salary sources and, equally important, your criteria for promotion. Go over these questions at least once a year with your division director to strategize your career planning. Use the discussion to learn how you fit with his/her vision of where the division is going and to clarify your short- and long-term career goals.

1. Howell, LP and Bertakis, KD. Clinical faculty tracks and academic success at the university of California medical schools. Acad Med 2004;79:250.

Dr. Wang is Staff Physician, Division of Chest and Critical Care, Scripps Clinic, San Diego and Associate Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of California, San Diego.