

Suggested Elements of an Effective Offer Letter**DRAFT**

Patricia Higgins, Eleanor Stoller, and Cyrus Taylor
Case Western Reserve University Resource Equity Committee

June 2006

As part of the ACES project at Case, which is supported by the NSF's ADVANCE program, the Case Resource Equity Committee (REC) is engaged in a multi-year study of our university's organizational culture. This multi-dimensional evaluation of institutional policies and customs has involved numerous projects, for example, a baseline assessment of faculty members' perceptions of responsibilities as well as their opinions of resource allocation. Currently, we are in the process of conducting an analysis of startup offers to new faculty, as summarized in the offer letters. The purpose of this report is to provide a list of "best practices" that we observed thus far in our set of offer letters (N = 68 letters, from 22 departments). It was written primarily to assist deans and department chairs in preparing their offer letters. We believe, however, that adoption of these guidelines by the Case community also has the potential to address two important issues: it will make the close of the search process more effective while at the same time providing clear expectations for both the new faculty member and her/his departmental administrator, thus promoting a welcoming culture while potentially reducing future problems.

Successful recruitment is a complex process that reflects expectations of faculty activity and commensurate needs for resources, both of which vary enormously across disciplines, and indeed, even within disciplines (experimental versus theoretical physics, for example). It is also a task of great importance because as Virginia Valian has noted, even small differences compound over time.¹

Since details of start-up packages reflect an individual's negotiating skills as well as differences in research specialty, department, and/or management center, there is room for significant variation. While some of this variation may be due to legitimate disciplinary differences, there also is the potential for disparities due to inadvertent omissions or lack of clarity in specifying essential details. For instance, as expected there were many different packages proposed for moving and relocation expenses but not all letters provided the requirements for reimbursement, nor the information that the compensation may be taxable income. We also found that the language of many of the letters was remarkably vague and consequently, we recommend greater specification of factors such as the teaching, research and service expectations for faculty in your department, as well as explicit information related to the benefits of working at Case; e.g., your department's intention to provide summer salary or travel support, special equipment or graduate assistantships. And finally, we recommend including information that will help the prospective faculty member understand the university's benefits and policies.

The resulting lack of uniformity among start-up packages and the unclear procedures for resource allocation at the time of hire generate actual differences as well as perceptions of

¹ Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow*, 1999.

unfairness among newly hired faculty. This has the potential of rendering the search process less effective than it might be while at the same time sowing the seeds of future difficulties, disagreements and discontent. The formal letter offering a position at a research university to a prospective new faculty member ideally represents both the culmination of the recruitment process and the launch of the new faculty member's career. It is thus an extremely important document and great care should be exercised to ensure that it is both effective in closing the search, and clear in terms of future employment. Based on our existing data set, we thus recommend that offer letters discuss the following details. We also provide suggestions for specific language; many are drawn directly from the 57 letters.

1. Full name of person to be hired. (This ought to be obvious, but we have an example of an official offer letter that includes neither the name nor the address of the person to whom the offer is being made!)
2. The rank of the position being offered should be clearly stated and correspond to official categories of appointments at the university.
3. The tenure status of the prospective appointment should be clearly stated. If the position is tenure track, clear language should be included regarding the timeline and process for tenure consideration. Options should also be discussed in detail, if appropriate, including references to relevant portions of the faculty handbook or other bylaws. This also applies to positions in which there is the possibility of a conversion between tenure track and non-tenure track. Options regarding possible extensions of the tenure clock should also be included, with reference to the appropriate procedures. Suggestions for possible language:
 - a. We are pleased to offer you a tenure track appointment. The pre-tenure period for Case faculty is 6 [or 9] years but you may be considered for tenure at any time before then.
 - b. Our university supports tenure clock extensions for both professional and personal reasons; for example, a tenure clock extension is available in cases of family emergencies and/or childbirth or adoption.
 - c. This is not a tenure-track appointment but this does not preclude future consideration for appointment in the tenure track. [or] This is not a tenure-track appointment nor does it lead to future tenure consideration.
 - d. It is my pleasure to offer you an appointment as a Professor with tenure. I am also recommending that you be appointed the xxx professor [endowed chair] for the period of..... This appointment is renewable.

4. The management center's format and timeline for faculty evaluation should be mentioned. If available, a web address with evaluation forms should be included. Suggested language:
 - a. Your yearly evaluation will occur each spring with the department chair and senior faculty. The evaluation document is available at [www.....](#)
 - b. Your formal evaluation will take place semi-annually with your mentors and annually with the Chair. Do not hesitate to contact any members of your mentoring committee at any time if you need advice. Contributions to be evaluated include:
 - i. Capability and willingness to contribute to the educational programs of the department.
 - ii. Evidence of effective research activity as supported by authorship on scientific papers and award of extramural funding.
 - iii. Active participation in the cultural and scientific activities of the department, including journal club, departmental meetings, and departmental retreats.
 - iv. Active participation in departmental committee work.
5. Standard language regarding the details of the appointment process should be included, recognizing that the offer letter must be signed before it can be forwarded to the Board of Trustees for final action. We suggest the following language:
 - a. Your appointment has been approved by the President and Provost and if you accept the offer, they will seek approval of the University Board of Trustees at its next meeting on [date].
6. Some letters specify that the prospective faculty member must resign all other academic appointments before assuming the faculty position at Case. If so, we suggest the following language:
 - a. In accepting this position, you must resign, effective [date], any other academic appointments you hold upon being informed that the Case Board of Trustees have approved your appointment.
7. The period that the offer is open should be specified:
 - a. If you choose to accept this offer, you must notify me to that effect within 30 days of its receipt.
 - b. This offer is in effect for 30 days from receipt of the letter.

8. Length of appointment for non-tenured faculty: term of initial appointment should be specified Possible language:
 - a. This is a one year appointment; it is renewable pending satisfactory annual performance reviews.
 - b. Both non-tenure and tenure-track faculty are appointed annually.
 - c. Your salary is guaranteed for at least three years, pending satisfactory annual performance reviews.

9. Starting salary, and all relevant details. For example:
 - a. Your salary for the 200x-200x academic year will be \$xxxx. Although faculty members receive 9-month academic year appointments, the salary is paid over 12 months to ensure continuous fringe benefit coverage.
 - b. Your salary for the 9-month academic year will be \$xxxx; yearly raises will be based on merit in accord with the established procedures of [management center].
 - c. Your appointment will be 51% effort, considered a fulltime faculty appointment in the non-tenure track, with an initial salary of \$xxxx, which includes all the benefits inherent in this position.

10. Any additional salary supplements should be specified, including amounts, corresponding duties, when and how it will be paid, and over what period it will be paid. For example:
 - a. During the summer, faculty may supplement their salary up to three-ninths of their academic year salary base through supported research. Should you not have obtained outside funding, the [management center] will guarantee you x-ninths salary for the summer(s) of....
 - b. You will receive one month of summer salary, calculated at the rate of 1/9 of your academic year salary, for work during the period of July 1-July 31 to begin your research program.
 - c. Summer salary is paid in one lump sum at the end of July.

11. The heart of the offer is of course the start up package. There are immense variations in the resources offered from discipline to discipline, and there are correspondingly many different ways of writing this section of the letter. In general, clarity of language is essential. Specific language can be detailed, or it can be nonspecific, but should be clear. The time period over which it is paid and what happens in the event of changes in the timetable should be included. A contact name also may be useful. For example:
 - a. We will provide you with \$xxxx in start-up funds, which can be spent over the period from your appointment until [specified date], unless an extension is approved by the dean. The funds may be used for.....
 - b. We will provide you with \$xxxx in start-up funds for equipment, supplies, operating expenses and \$xxxx for travel support, which can be spent over 2 years.
 - c. In addition to salary, we will provide you with up to \$xxxx in start-up funds for computer hardware, software, associated travel, and research expenses.
 - d. In the unexpected event that somewhat more start-up is needed to cover specialty items, we have some flexibility.
 - e. In addition to salary, the [management center] routinely provides all faculty members with computers, printers and technical support and we have discretionary funds that can be used for travel support or research expenses.
 - a. Conditional on robust efforts, as judged by the dean, to raise the funds from extramural sources, the [management center] will provide you with \$xxxx summer salary and salary for postdocs, graduate stipends and undergraduate research. These funds expire [date], unless an extension is approved by the dean.
 - f. The [management center] will match dollar for dollar, up to \$xxxx, extramural funding obtained by you and received by the [management center] for summer salary and salary for postdocs or graduate students, etc.

12. Teaching expectations need to be discussed with the same care as the offer of resources. For example, the expected teaching load should be stated. A copy of the relevant promotion and tenure guidelines should be attached. If there is a departmental or school policy regarding teaching releases, including either pre-tenure teaching releases or the possibility of “buying out” course requirements, these should be discussed. Some suggestions:

- a. Teaching is expected of all faculty members and is considered in the decision for promotion and/or tenure. Quality teaching is also important to provide a good training environment for our graduate students.
- b. Your normal teaching load is xx courses for any given academic year.
- c. To assist you in your new assignment, you will not be assigned teaching responsibilities for the [fall/spring] semester in [year]. This will not affect your right to request a one-semester pre-tenure teaching release at a time that is mutually agreeable with your department chair.
- d. With respect to teaching, I would like you to participate in several labs and small group sessions with the xxx curriculum.
- e. You will have one course reduction for every xx% of extramural funding that you receive.
- f. You will receive one course reduction for your editorial responsibilities.

13. Expectations of research/scholarship and external funding: While there is significant variation among disciplines, the following may be useful:

- a. The requirement for tenure at Case is demonstration of high scientific achievement, including a consistent publishing record and stable funding from national sources.

14. Expectations of departmental, university or external service also should be discussed.

15. Moving and relocation expenses, if any, should be discussed:

- a. In terms of moving expenses we will be happy to reimburse you for direct costs and up to two visits to secure housing. I have to inform you that such reimbursements are now considered taxable income.
- b. The university will reimburse you for reasonable portion of your household relocation expenses, based on estimates you obtain and comparisons performed by the college’s Office of Finance and Administration. Estimates should be submitted to [name] and we will notify you of the amount that the college can provide. Payment can be made directly to you after submission of a final bill or through direct billing of the college by the moving company. It is important to note that although Internal Revenue Service rules allow taxpayers to deduct properly documented relocation expenses, the reimbursement of such expenses is sometimes found to be taxable income.

16. The provision of office and/or research space should be specified. For example,
 - a. The space you will be offered is approximately 1000 square feet and will be renovated by the [management center] to best meet your needs. Once you have drawn up plans for renovations, [provide a specific name] will be helpful in finalizing them.
 - b. You will have access to all equipment in xxx lab and to all common departmental facilities.

17. Standard language regarding the regulations of Immigration and Naturalization Service should be included:
 - a. Regulations of the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (formerly INS) require employers to complete Form I-9, Employment Eligibility Verification, on all personnel. The I-9 form must be completed within three business days of the actual commencement of employment and must be complete in person by the employees. A document list is attached. Please contact the Office of Human Resources at 216 368-4505 to schedule an appointment to complete the necessary paperwork, schedule new staff orientation, and to discuss benefits.

18. Standard language regarding the fringe benefits package, including a reference to the Case website for Human Resources should be included. We suggest:
 - a. In addition to the above start-up package, the university offers a fringe benefits package. Brochures for the xxx year are enclosed. You may also access this information at www.case.edu/finadmin/humres/

19. Finally, it should be remembered that the offer letter is a recruiting document. Despite the long list of issues that need to be addressed, the letter is an indication of the university's organizational culture and should read welcoming, and indicate enthusiasm for the prospect of the recipient joining our faculty. The letter should also be personalized where possible. For example:
 - a. I am delighted that you are seriously thinking of joining the faculty of....There is no doubt in my mind that your presence will make a major difference in expanding the programs in our department and that it will be a personally and academically rewarding experience.
 - b. Your strong background in [xx] and [yy] will be very helpful in teaching these topics to our students.
 - c. I am pleased to inform you that the faculty of strongly recommends that you be extended an offer of a faculty position.
 - d. We think that Case is an environment where you will be able to prosper, and where your contributions will be recognized.