

Interview Study of STEM Faculty Who Turned Down Offers
University of Michigan
ADVANCE Program
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INTRODUCTION

The ADVANCE Program conducted an interview study of tenure track faculty who had turned down offers of faculty positions in STEM departments in one college. The purpose of the study was to learn about candidates' experiences during the hiring and interview process, as well as the factors they considered in their decisions, in an effort to improve the success rate of new faculty hires. The study sample included individuals who had been offered positions in any of the STEM departments, as well as some STEM program areas, over a three year period: academic year 2007 through academic year 2009.

The total pool was 30 faculty members (all of whom turned down a tenure track faculty position during the period in question); to date, 15 participated in the study (50% response rate. Half (47%) of the interviewees were female. We do not have information about the rank of the position for which they applied.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

All faculty were interviewed over the telephone by trained interviewers. Interviews were confidential and interviewers were selected who had no direct or indirect relationship with the faculty member with whom they talked or with the department in question. Notes were taken of the interviews, and, when permission was granted, interviews were also audio-recorded.

All interview notes were de-identified to preserve the confidentiality of the participants. A previously developed, reliable coding system was used to code all interview summaries. It should be noted that coding categories were usually not mutually exclusive, meaning that one person's response could be coded across multiple coding categories; therefore, coding categories do not always add up to 100%.

Following is a summary of findings from this study describing the experiences of job candidates during the interview process as well as the factors they considered in their decisions. Responses are presented in the aggregate to protect individual identities. Generally, we report frequencies of responses.

FINDINGS

Considerations Affecting Studying Interview Responses

We report and discuss people's views of their motives and experiences, as they reported them to us. We recognize that the process of making any decision, particularly an important, life-changing decision, is complex, and psychologists have demonstrated a range of factors that are likely to affect how people experience their decisions. For example, we know that people in the middle of a decision report how they are weighing various factors somewhat differently than they do once the decision is made (when the motivation to justify the decision is much stronger). We emphasize that in this study we can only describe what individuals report to us about the key factors that motivated them, and their feelings about both Michigan and their decisions to turn down a position here. We recognize that people are normally strongly motivated to justify decisions they have made, and that this motivation inevitably affects these results in ways we cannot assess directly.

Reasons for Applying for a Position at UM

Nearly half of the respondents reported the department's, College's and/or University's reputation (47%) or the fit in the department with their own research interests (47%) were factors in their decision to apply for a position at UM. In addition, one-quarter (27%) indicated that they had been encouraged by department members to apply for the position. A few noted opportunities for collaborative scholarship (13%) and the quality of the faculty in the department (7%) as reasons as well. And one-fifth (20%) indicated that the University's location made it an attractive option for them. One described Ann Arbor as a "very cool little town."

Visit

Faculty were asked about their visit to UM, how it compared to visits to other institutions, and if any particular aspects of their UM visit contributed to their decision not to accept an appointment in the College. Faculty were also asked if anyone at UM had asked them questions about their family or family plans.

Campus Visit. All of the candidates described the visit as a positive experience (one described it as stressful as well). Nearly half (47%) indicated that their visit was well-organized. One noted, "the details were all taken care of and I only had to focus on the science and interaction with colleagues;" another described everyone as "very professional." In addition, 20% made special note of the chair; one described the chair as "amazing" in managing the visit and any difficulties that arose and another found "everything out in the open; chair was wonderful." A few (13%) noted a generally positive department environment. People were described as "very gracious," respectful," and "genuinely interested in [the candidate's] work;" one noted that it was "easy to get a sense of what it would be like to be a faculty member" in the department. A few specifically mentioned receiving good questions and/or positive feedback from the faculty during the job talk (13%); however, a few (13%) also described experiences with rude faculty or exposure to department politics. Three-quarters of the faculty (67%) described opportunities to meet a range of faculty. One was pleased about being able to "meet a whole spectrum of faculty in [candidate's] research area." However, only one woman reported opportunities to meet other women scientists outside the department. Far fewer faculty reported having meetings with graduate students (13%). Those who did appreciated those experiences; one reported, "it was a great part of the visit and didn't happen everywhere." Finally, a few faculty (13%) made special note of their disappointment with lab facilities they were shown.

One third of the respondents (36%) reported that the visit to Michigan compared favorably to visits at other institutions. One appreciated meeting many faculty during the day and having dinner with them at night. Another described the people as "warmer" at Michigan and that the "folks at [other institution] did not ask about [the candidate's] personal life and only wanted to talk about their own research, whereas the Michigan faculty wanted to talk about [the candidate's] work and their own work in relation to [the candidate's] work—the focus was on [the candidate], not them." Another was impressed by "how proud the faculty were to be part of [the department] and that the junior faculty seemed very happy." Far fewer (9%) compared the visit less favorably to other institutions and half (55%) reported that the visit was comparable.

When asked if any particular aspects of their visit stood out as contributing to their decision to turn down an appointment at UM, most (83%) said no. A few mentioned disappointment with the facilities (8%) and frustration that family needs were not more accommodated during a second visit (8%).

Questions about family. Participants reported on whether or not they had been asked about their family or family plans by anyone at UM during their visit. Half (53%) reported that it was discussed. In most instances the candidate brought up the issue (27%) or it was discussed generally to provide information to the candidate (20%). Candidates generally viewed this as positive; one found the faculty very informative and was “floored” by the quality of the public school system. One reported being asked the question inappropriately. It is worth noting that the last two conditions (brought up to provide information or asked illegally) only occurred with female candidates. Moreover, one candidate was not asked directly about family plans, but recalled a faculty member “joked” that it was not good when they find a candidate who has not had children yet.

Post Visit Experiences

Participants were asked several questions about their experiences following their campus visit, including what happened after the visit, and if they were contacted by department faculty.

After the Campus Visit. Half of the candidates (47%) indicated that they received encouraging communications (mostly e-mails) from department faculty after the visit. One described “a lot of outreach” on the part of the department and getting information and “reassurance.” One-third (33%) communicated with the chair about concerns they had and 20% actively negotiated with the department. Two were pushed to develop an equipment list (and one, in particular, felt a sense of “stinginess” on the part of the department as questions were raised about the necessity of different items on the list); one noted frustration with a lack of housing support. A few heard nothing for a long time after the interview (7%) or reported that the process took too long (7%); for some this was complicated as partner hires were also involved. Finally, 13% noted difficult second visits trying to accommodate demands for their time from the department and needs of their families (who were also visiting) at the same time.

Decision to Turn Down Offer

Participants were asked about the circumstances that led to their turning down the offer as well as what factors they considered in making this decision. Additional questions specifically addressed the role the following factors played in participants’ decisions: the teaching load/requirements and quality of students; the department’s interpersonal environment or climate; the location; and what other institutions had done that made them more attractive than UM.

Circumstances leading to decision. Many of the candidates noted conditions of the position that factored into their decision not to accept the offer. These included the lab space (27%), salary and start-up (13%), teaching load (13%), opportunities for a joint appointment (7%), and counter-offer from their home institution (7%). One asserted that the inadequate lab space could only be overcome by an “out of the park” financial offer and another felt that the teaching requirement would be an impediment to reaching personal research and publication goals.

A few noted issues related to the department; these included concern about the tenure rate (13%) and negative personalities in the department (13%). One candidate confessed that the department was “too honest” and that s/he shouldn’t have been exposed to the “political stuff” existing among some faculty members. Finally, 20% cited not wanting to relocate to Ann Arbor, including concerns about the Michigan economy, and 13% noted other family concerns, including partner positions.

Factors in decision. The candidates were also asked what factors they considered in their decision. Most identified issues specifically related to the position itself. Nearly two-thirds (66%) considered

opportunities for research and/or the fit of their work with the department. The same percentage considered workload, including teaching responsibilities; and half (49%) considered the start-up and salary offer; one noted larger start-ups at other institutions with no strings attached. A few (13%) considered family needs.

Students. When asked specifically about the role of students in their decision, nearly half (47%) reported that the UM students were a positive factor in their decision; 40% indicated that they played no role and 13% reported them as a negative factor.

Teaching load/Teaching requirements. One fifth (20%) of the candidates viewed the department's teaching requirements as a positive factor in their considerations. Forty percent viewed it as a negative factor, and the remaining 40% indicated that teaching requirements did not factor into their deliberations.

Department's Climate. Two-thirds (67%) of candidates indicated that the department's environment played a positive role in their decision-making; a few viewed it negatively (7%) or indicated it played no role (20%). [For the remaining 6% it was unclear if climate was a factor for them.]

Location. Forty percent viewed the University's location as a negative factor in their decision-making; some of this concern was related to worries about the Michigan economy. Over half reported that the location either played a positive role (27%) or was not a factor in their decision-making (27%). [For the remaining 6% it was unclear if location was a factor for them.]

Reputation. Finally, almost all of the candidates (80%) reported that the department's and/or University's reputation was a positive role in their deliberations; the remaining 20% viewed it as a negative.

Other Institutions. Candidates were asked if other institutions had done anything to make them more attractive; half (53%) of them reported they did not. One third (33%) indicated that another institution had provided a better start up and/or salary package; an additional 13% received retention offers from their home institutions; and 7% reported a better negotiation process other places. A few pointed to better facilities (7%), better teaching load (7%); and better tenure rate (7%) at another institution.

Attractive and Unattractive Aspects of Department/College

Participants were asked to list three things that they found most and least attractive about the College or department.

Most Attractive Features of Department or College. More than half (60%) of the candidates mentioned the collegial nature of the department as one of its most attractive features. Also mentioned was the family oriented nature of the department (7%) and a diverse department where there is a home for underrepresented minority scholars (7%). Similarly, 53% noted the reputation of the faculty specifically or of the department or college more generally. Almost as many (47%) found the fit between their work and that of the department attractive. One described a diverse, intellectually department with faculty interested in "deep questions"; another was excited that the department was building a research program that could include the candidate's work; a third found the atmosphere in the department "very exciting." A similar number (47%) identified the location of the University as the most attractive aspect; Ann Arbor was described by one as a "family-friendly" community. A few mentioned the department's administration (20%); one described the chair and associate chair as providing an exceptional

experience by making it clear that they wanted the candidate to succeed. A similar number (27%) identified graduate students and/or post docs as one of the most attractive aspects of the department; one gained a real sense of community from interactions with students. Mentoring of junior faculty, tenure rate in the department, teaching load, start-up package, and financial stability of the University were also mentioned by 7% for each.

Least Attractive Features of Department or College. Fewer negative aspects of the department or college were noted by candidates. Most frequently mentioned as one of three least attractive features of the department or college was lab space (47%). In addition, 47% identified the lack of fit between their work and faculty in the department or few opportunities for collaboration within or across units, and one noted a feeling of being “pigeon-holed” in terms of scholarship. One-third (33%) were unhappy about UM’s location and another 13% expressed concern about the Michigan economy. One-quarter described dissatisfaction with financial aspects of the offer, including lack of negotiation and inflexibility in how start-up was spent. A similar number (27%) found the teaching load in the department unattractive; an additional 7% mentioned the workload more generally. A few (13%) identified the reputation of the department as a negative; an additional 7% expressed concern about the quality of the students. Finally, 7% each mentioned concern about the tenure rate and difficult personalities in the department; 13% reported that the lack of an adequate partner position made UM unattractive.

Practices to Improve the Hiring Process

Participants were asked what, if anything, the department or college could have done differently that might have encouraged them to accept the offer and if they had any suggestions of policies or procedures that they felt could improve the hiring practices in the department.

Several had suggestions about changes or improvements to the hiring process. These included: speed up the process, be clearer about the tenure process with junior faculty, be clear about dual career policies and treat partner and partner needs with respect (in several cases, partners made the ultimate decision about where a family would live); be accommodating to family needs during the second visit; focus on a single hire (some indicated feeling in competition when they were one of several being offered a position); and provide information about life in Ann Arbor for singles as well as for those with families (7% mentioned each of these). In addition, some had suggestions concerning their offers; these included better salary and/or start-up (20%), better opportunities for interdisciplinary scholarship (7%) and reduced teaching load (27%); on this last issue one noted that some institutions only require one class preparation for the first two years. And 7% encouraged departments to be clear and transparent in negotiations. Finally, some (20%) indicated that there was nothing the department or University could do to improve the hiring process.

Other suggestions for policies or procedures to improve hiring practices included more opportunities to meet faculty (7%) and connect with other schools (7%), more open searches (7%), and more focus on diversity (7%). Nearly half (47%) indicated that there was nothing that could be done to improve practices.

SUMMARY: KEY FINDINGS

The following represents a summary of the key findings from the study:

- Views of department:
 - the department's and the University's reputation are both important factors in drawing potential hires; however, they seemed to play a less important role in helping faculty decide whether to accept a position;
 - the quality of faculty and opportunities for collaboration in the department or across units were also listed as positive aspects;
 - candidate's view of the scholarship in the department and their fit in that work was critical to most;
 - many of the candidates viewed the University's location as a positive;
 - and over one-quarter applied after receiving some encouragement from a department member.

- Interview process:
 - all described the visit as a positive experience overall (and most reported it was more positive, or comparable, to other visits);
 - in particular, many appreciated how well-organized the visits were;
 - several mentioned the warmth and collegiality of the faculty and support and effectiveness of the department's administration; collegiality was most often cited as a one of the most attractive features of the UM department;
 - candidates appreciated meeting both faculty and graduate students;
 - most had opportunities to meet a range of faculty but far fewer met with graduate students--and half identified students as a factor in their decision (this finding is consistent with an earlier, similar study of candidates who turned down offer in one department);
 - and most women candidates did not have an opportunity to meet with women scientists outside of the department (this finding is also consistent with that earlier study);
 - a few candidates were exposed to department politics or negative personalities that factored into their decisions not to accept the offer;
 - several appreciated the opportunity to learn about resources for families; others would have found the same information for singles helpful;
 - those with young families expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of accommodation to their families' needs during the second visit;
 - some were disconcerted when multiple searches were taking place in the department and felt in competition with other candidates.

- Several issues were raised as potential concerns about the positions offered:
 - a number of respondents indicated that the teaching load was too heavy or intense (and heavier than those at other institutions);
 - several expressed concern about lab space and the facilities in general as being old;
 - several indicated that salaries were low and/or the start-up was inadequate (specifically in terms of how the money could be spent);
 - some found the negotiation process slow, inflexible and/or "stingy" (this was consistent with findings from the earlier study);
 - the department's tenure rate was also raised as a concern by a few;

- those with partners looking for positions expressed concern that their partners were not taken seriously or respected;
- some expressed unhappiness with UM's location; in particular Michigan's economy was a concern to some;
- Suggestions for improving the process included:
 - more information during their visit (for example about the tenure process, dual career opportunities and the negotiation process);
 - more and clearer information about dual-career policies and need to take partners seriously;
 - improved negotiation processes—more timely, more transparent, more flexible;
 - reduced teaching loads (e.g., one course preparation for two years);
 - more opportunities for collaboration across units;
 - more open searches and more focus on diversity.

Recommendations

Based on the interviews, we suggest the following:

1. All recruitment efforts should be wholehearted and the department should aim to represent itself in as unified a manner as possible (e.g., whether the area is important to the department, etc.). Efforts should be made to convey the specific value of the candidate to the department.
2. To whatever extent is possible, offers should be made on a fast and clear timeline and should be as generous as those at other institutions.
3. All visits should include formal meetings with students. Effort should be made to coordinate these visits so they are well-attended by students, constructive for the candidate, and leave a good impression of the students' participation in the department life.
4. Women candidates should be offered a formal opportunity to meet with women faculty, postdocs and graduate students. The most important group is women faculty, but if that is impossible or inappropriate, given timing or subfield, postdocs and graduate students are extremely important. It is also valuable to have women candidates meet with women in other departments who can discuss the climate for women on campus more generally, and/or the availability of the ADVANCE program.
5. Take partner's employment needs seriously and treat all partners with respect. Family needs figure prominently in many candidates' deliberations and partners often make the final decision about where the family will live.
6. All faculty and students should be aware that it is illegal and also counter-productive to ask candidates any questions about their personal lives (marital status, plans for children, etc.). Not only do candidates resent these questions, but they also do not answer truthfully, because they assume that the desired answer is that they will or do not have personal lives.