

“Wow, I Didn’t Know These Options Existed”: Understanding Tenure-Track Start-Up Packages

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ABSTRACT


Start-up packages vary enormously, particularly across institutions, and not all faculty know what items they may negotiate for to support their probationary period. To demystify this part of the hidden curriculum, we discuss the components of start-up packages and other benefits that may be provided to new faculty at the time of hire. We focus on five broad topics: compensation and personal support, general support, research support, teaching support, and service and professional development. Drawing on the results of a survey of tenure-track assistant political science professors in the United States, we also provide an overview of the prevalence of a variety of items at different types of institutions and discuss other considerations in the negotiation process to close the knowledge gap for candidates during negotiations.


At the time of hire into tenure-track jobs, some faculty, but not all, receive offers with attached benefits intended to attract them to the position and provide them the resources they need as they work toward tenure. In the process of surveying assistant professors in the summer of 2020 to understand more about research funding, it became clear that many new faculty in political science do not know the degree to which packages vary by institution and offer. As one respondent put it, “Wow, I didn’t know these options existed.” These responses are understandable given the diversity of packages within departments and across institutions, along with the lack of shared knowledge in the discipline (Lorentz et al. *n.d.*). Although known disparities (Brown et al. 2021; Samuels and Teele 2021; Teele and Thelen 2017) cannot be overcome by negotiation alone, those with an informational advantage may be able to negotiate better

offers (Mitchell and Hesli 2013). By providing this information to all, we aim to demystify an important part of the hidden curriculum (Barham and Wood 2022; Calarco 2020).

In this article, we present an accounting of recent items that faculty in political science have been offered or negotiated for in their start-up packages. Rather than offering advice to individuals on *how* to negotiate, we focus on a range of items that others have negotiated successfully.¹ Although we recognize that in many ways the items and considerations we discuss represent a dream scenario out of reach for many hires at different types of institutions, the knowledge of options available in the field may still be helpful, as noted by the respondent who replied, “This survey was informative for letting me know what I could ask for in negotiations.” We focus on five broad topics: compensation and personal support, general support, research support, teaching support, and service and professional development. Drawing on the results of a 2020 survey of tenure-track assistant political science professors in the United States, we also provide an overview of the prevalence of a variety of items at different types of institutions and conclude with some additional considerations for candidates in the negotiation process.

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THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM AND NEGOTIATION

Negotiating can feel uncomfortable to job candidates, but it is a normal, expected part of the process of academic hiring. Failure to negotiate can have career-long repercussions, particularly when it comes to salary. As such, most scholarship on hiring negotiation focuses on salaries (e.g., Compton and Palmer 2009; Fiset and Saffie-Robertson 2020; Renzulli, Kelly, and Grant 2013), which vary widely as a function of institutional and individual factors (Claypool et al. 2017). This focus obscures information about other negotiable benefits.

Success in negotiating a start-up package in part depends on knowing what to ask for, and gaps and inequalities in mentoring and professionalization opportunities likely limit job candidates' knowledge of what is negotiable. As Calarco (2020) points out, graduate students, particularly those from marginalized communities, often lack or are denied access to the unwritten and unspoken knowledge and skills necessary to successfully navigate graduate school and the job market process. This was echoed by a respondent who noted, "Wow, I'm learning just how many things exist that I had no idea about. Feels like a failure of mentorship." As greater attention is paid to creating more inclusive spaces in political science and in academia more broadly (Tormos-Aponte 2021; Windsor, Crawford, and Breuning 2021), part of the success in doing so will rely on making hidden curricula more visible and accessible to all (Barham and Wood 2022). To address these inequities, others have suggested that faculty should make the hidden curriculum visible as part of the formal graduate school curriculum or through targeted opportunities, such as peer-led workshops (Barham and Wood 2022; Lavariaga Monforti and Michelson 2019), writing groups (Cassese and Holman 2018), associations and conferences (Barnes and Beaulieu 2017), or other increased mentoring and networking opportunities (Argyle and Mendelberg 2020; Bos and Schneider 2012).

Building on others' calls and efforts for a more inclusive discipline, we discuss part of the hidden curriculum involving the negotiations stage of tenure-track jobs. By sharing and describing what other recent assistant professors were able to negotiate in their start-up packages, we seek to empower job candidates with more of the knowledge necessary to navigate the start-up package bargaining process across a variety of institutions. What follows is a discussion of items compiled from our survey questions about start-up packages, along with respondents' descriptions in open-ended response boxes of other support received; these data capture the extremely varied nature of start-

assistant professor at an R1 program (as of 2019). We did the same for non-R1 assistant professors at a random sample of 153 institutions drawn from the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. We sent emails in the summer of 2020 to 1,006 faculty, of whom 370 completed the survey, resulting in a 36.8% response rate.² In terms of gender, 52.5% of the sample identify as men, 46.9% as women, and 0.6% as nonbinary.

Respondents were promised anonymity to encourage participation, so we are not able to link individual respondents to institutions; however, we did ask whether their institution was public or private and the highest degree their department granted. Of the respondents, 62% are employed at public institutions. Given our sampling frame, more than two-thirds of respondents (69%) are in departments with PhD programs, although almost 19% are in bachelors-only departments. More than 43% of respondents were in their first academic position, and 16% were tenured or in tenure-track positions elsewhere prior to their current position. Similarly, 65% had no other offers at the time they received their current job offer.

Respondents were asked to report whether they received a start-up fund and were offered certain benefits. Each survey item and the proportion of respondents who received it are displayed in figure 1, alongside 95% confidence intervals representing our best guess at the true value in the population. In addition to providing information about the prevalence of these items, we discuss additional benefits and considerations.

START-UP ITEMS TO CONSIDER

Compensation and Personal Support

Salary is the first and likely the most important of all the items to negotiate for financial security (Babcock and Laschever 2003; Buckman and Jackson 2021; Claypool et al. 2017). Merit and cost-of-living raises are frequently determined as a percentage of salary, making the starting salary even more important. Due to the scarcity of raises in academia, this may be the only time to negotiate salary until the individual earns tenure or receives a competing job offer.

Given the focus in the literature on salary negotiations, it is likely that most job seekers consider salary first when thinking about negotiations. However, they may think less often of other types of support, both monetary and temporal. Just under one-third of faculty reported additional compensation available in the form of "summer 1/9ths," additional salary increments equal to

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up packages and benefits across institutions. Although this information is neither exhaustive nor applicable to all situations, we hope it will provide new hires with additional items to consider that will support their new tenure-track positions.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

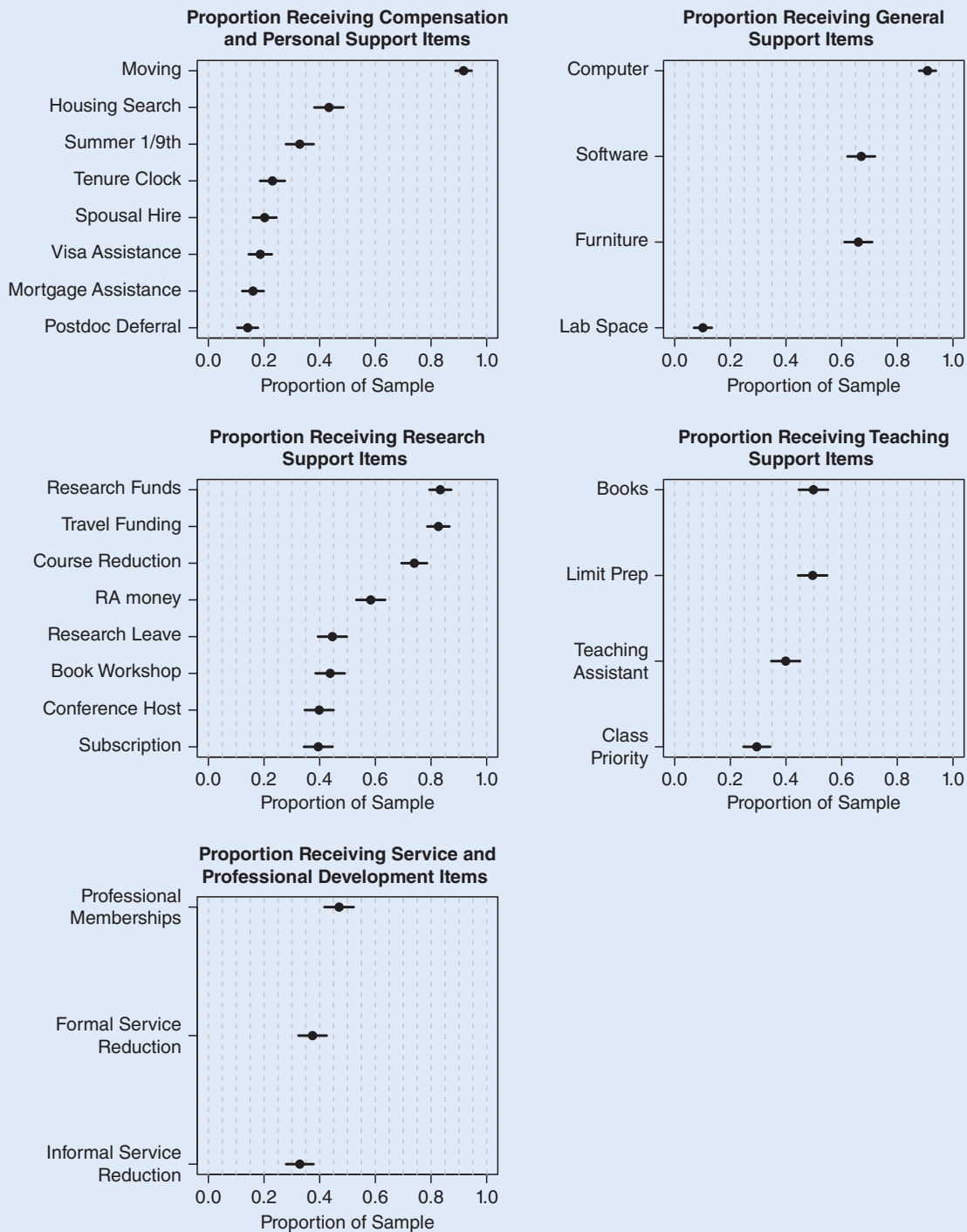
To explore the contents of start-up packages, we used political science departmental websites to create a sampling frame of every

one-ninth of the faculty member's nine-month contract rate, as part of their start-up packages.³ One respondent was even able to secure a \$5,000 signing bonus.

In addition to salary, time credited toward tenure—particularly for those starting a new position after completing postgraduate positions such as a postdoc or visiting position—may be able to be negotiated, with the benefit of moving someone closer to a raise that may come with tenure and promotion. Other calendar

Figure 1

Proportion Receiving Start-Up Package Items



adjustments may be possible to allow for a postdoc opportunity or accommodate other circumstances.

Given the nature of the job market, many academics relocate for their first jobs. Institutions can offer moving assistance in the form of reimbursements for moving expenses and housing search trips, as well as dedicated staff to assist in relocation. Relocation offices may provide move coordinators, particularly for

international moves, and assistance in finding housing. Mortgage assistance or subsidized housing may be available, for which waitlist priority can sometimes be negotiated.

Universities can offer immigration assistance as well. It may come in the form of payment of visa and green card costs, as well as subsidies for legal fees. In the open responses, some faculty reported that they successfully negotiated coverage of costs for

partners and dependents, either in the form of payment in full or a 0% interest loan to cover these fees.

Although notoriously difficult to procure, some universities do offer spousal accommodations, either as a dual hire typically for academic partners or assistance in job searching. One survey respondent, for example, prioritized negotiation of a spousal hire over other parts of the start-up package.

Health insurance is particularly important for scholars at institutions in the United States and other countries without access to comprehensive government-funded health care. In addition to employer-provided plans, it may be possible to negotiate for a change in start date or for the institution to cover continuation of benefits (COBRA) payments during transition periods when insurance would otherwise lapse. Health and parenting-related leaves can also be negotiated, including options for extended parental leaves at universities lacking adequate parental support policies.

General Support

Start-up packages to support the various components of the job are structured differently across institutions. At some institutions, faculty may receive designated funds for furnishing their office or purchasing a computer, whereas other institutions may provide these amenities to everyone free of charge. Professors have successfully negotiated for additional computers, computers with their preferred operating system, other software and equipment needs, and office or lab space. As one respondent noted in an open response, ergonomic assessments and accommodations may be available.

Research Support

Because research is one of the key assessments of faculty for tenure at many institutions, faculty should think carefully about what research needs they will have to produce a successful body of work to achieve tenure and promotion at their institution. This calculus may involve a trade-off between different benefits. For example, a respondent noted that, because of the expense of fieldwork, they were forced to forego summer funding to finance their research. Funding for research is a key way that departments support research. In [figure 1](#), we illustrate what proportion of faculty received any research funds, although there is enormous variation in how much each received. Research funds can also vary in whether and at what point they expire and what they can be used for. Based on their expected research agendas, job applicants may wish to negotiate research funds' expiration dates; to make the research funds go further, they may wish to negotiate for certain items (e.g., a computer) to be given to them, rather than paid for from their research funds.

Teaching load is a frequent point of negotiation with implications for research productivity. Course reductions of one or more courses over the pre-tenure period may be available.⁴ Faculty, particularly those at more intensive research institutions, may negotiate research leaves for a semester or the full year.⁵

Conference travel is another frequently encountered research expense. Respondents noted success in negotiating funds both to attend and host conferences. Money to bring in speakers or host book or manuscript workshops may also be available.

Research funding requests may be more successful if tied to specific research needs, including compensation for or assignment of research assistants. Subscriptions, such as datasets, specialized

software, or professional memberships, may be negotiable. If not available through the library, funds for journals or books necessary for research (and potentially teaching) may be available as well.

Teaching Support

Some institutions will offer new faculty priority in course selection or place a cap on the number of new course preps required in the first year or over the course of the probationary period. Priority in class scheduling and the size of classes may also be negotiable. Depending on institutional resources, there may be additional support available, including teaching assistants.

At some institutions, particularly those with more of a teaching focus, special pots of money may be set aside for instructional purposes. These funds could include money for books related to the courses the faculty member teaches, active learning supplies, or money to defray the costs of experiential learning opportunities. The institution may also have funds to support student-led research projects or theses.

Service and Professional Development

To allow for more time for research or teaching, universities may offer a reduction in service activities either for a portion of the probationary period or throughout it. Respondents noted both formal and informal service reductions, including some that were promised but did not come to fruition.⁶ Some jobs come with additional formal service responsibilities, including pre-law advising and program direction, and new hires should consider what support or release from other activities might be available to accompany these positions.

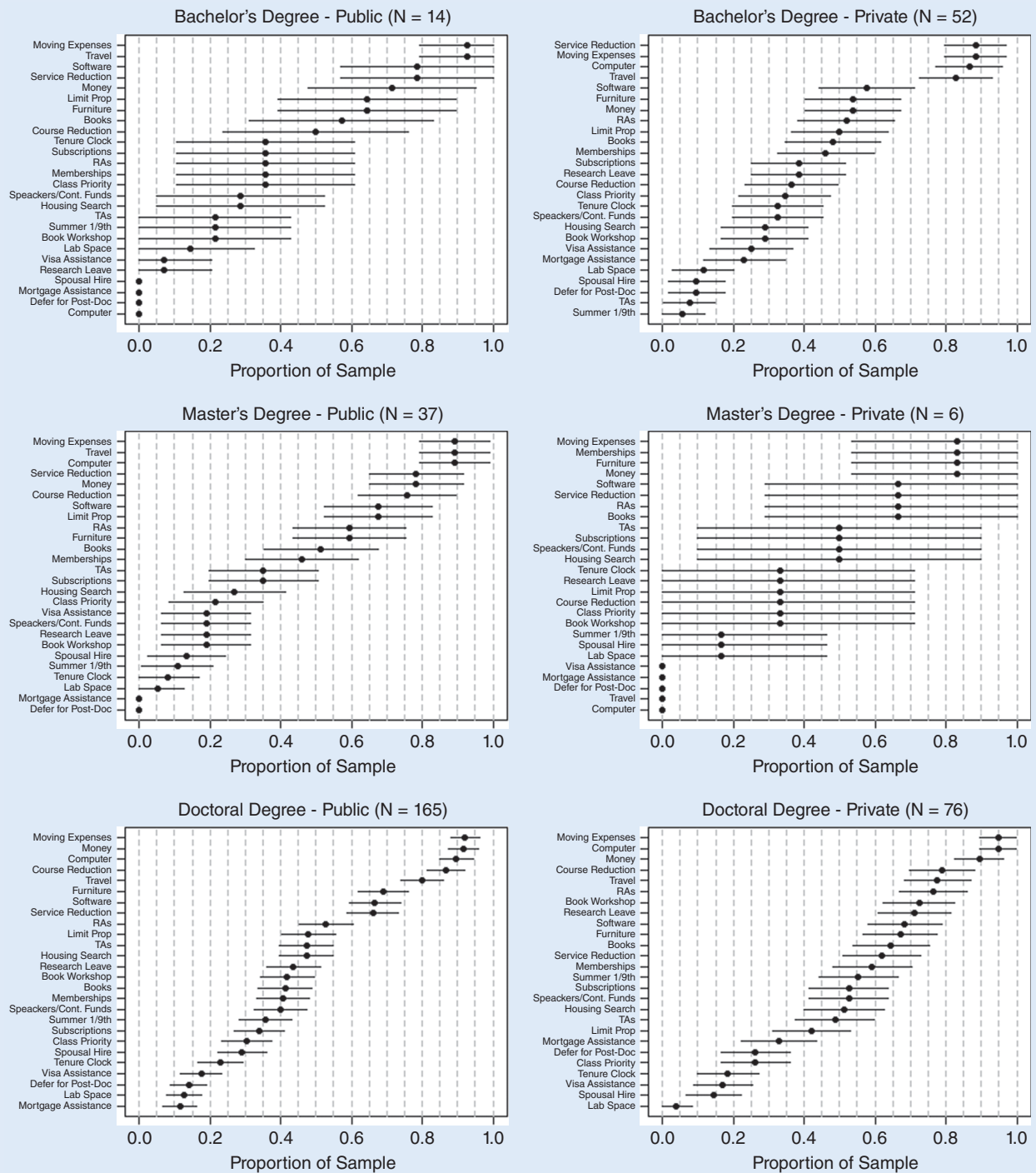
Institutions may offer funding for professional development opportunities. These funds may be used for certifications, diversity workshops, nonacademic professional conferences, and continuing legal education and bar fees for faculty with JDs.

HOW PACKAGES COMPARE

How common any of these items are depends on the type of institution. Although some items—for example, moving expenses—are common across all institution types, others may be more or less standard based on the institution type. In this section, we provide an overview of the relative prevalence of each item broken down by institution, along with confidence intervals that reflect the best guess at population prevalence based on our sample. Our aim is not to compare across institution types, but rather to inform individuals about what the landscape is like within the institution type they are negotiating with: which items are largely given, which are a potentially achievable reach, and which are possible but not especially likely.

In [figure 2](#), each dot represents the proportion of hires within that type of institution who received the particular item within our sample. Because our sampling frame resulted in fewer observations for non-PhD-granting institutions, it is reasonable to expect that our inferences about the population are best for those and less certain for other types. As such, the horizontal bars represent 95% confidence intervals: our best guess at the proportion within the population.⁷ Dots at zero with no horizontal bars are items that never occurred in the data for that subsample, and as such our best (and only) guess is zero, but we have no insight into the range.

Figure 2
Start-Up Packages by Institutional Type



What emerges from the plots in figure 2 is a rough sense of the modal package at each institutional type. For instance, although receiving research funding is standard across all types, the amount of money varies. In our sample, 83% of respondents received research funds, with a median amount of \$25,000. This amount, however, obscures a great deal of variation in funding.

Of those receiving funds, the median amount of money received was \$9,000 for public bachelor's-granting, \$14,750 for private bachelor's-granting, \$11,250 for public master's-granting, \$35,000 for private master's-granting, \$25,000 for public doctoral-granting, and \$47,500 for private doctoral-granting institutions.

In bachelor's-granting departments, the modal package consists of moving expenses, service reductions, software, and travel. Each of these items was provided to at least half of respondents and have confidence intervals that do not cross 0.5. At private BA-granting programs, computers also appear to be standard,

Depending on institutional resources, faculty may want to consider whether items they are negotiating are one-time costs or recurring ones. For example, moving expenses are costs that occur once, in contrast to journal subscriptions that will have to be renewed annually and may end up being more expensive in the

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whereas no one reported them at public BA-granting departments, making it unclear how prevalent they are.

Master's-granting programs tend also to almost universally offer moving expenses and research money, and at public schools, more than half of respondents reported also receiving limited course prep, course reductions, service reductions, a computer, and travel. It is harder to draw conclusions about private master's-granting departments given the small sample size, but by the same criteria, more than half reported receiving furniture and memberships. Again, in each case the confidence intervals do not cross 0.5.

Public doctoral-granting institutions have similar modal packages to master's-granting programs: they typically include moving expenses, research money, a computer, course reduction(s), travel,

long run. It is also a good time to ask during the initial negotiation process about other resources that might be available later, such as internal grants.

One situation that faculty need to plan for is the possibility of lapses in receiving resources. There may be a lapse in pay between leaving their previous employer or graduation and beginning at a new institution. For instance, a contract may begin on July 1 or August 1, but the first paycheck may not come until the end of September. It is also likely that some institutions will expect to reimburse candidates for expenses. We encourage candidates to ask about the reimbursement process at their new institution.

Finally, we would be remiss if we did not remind faculty to get all the package components, such as service expectations and teaching accommodations, they have negotiated for in writing and

Administrators and budgets change, but having written documentation of agreements makes it less likely that these changes will adversely affect you.

furniture, and service reductions. In our sample, the modal package also includes software. Private doctoral-granting programs have the largest modal package and the one that is most obviously geared toward facilitating research. In addition to what public institutions offer, private institutions also tend to offer research assistants, book workshops, and research leave. By contrast, at public doctoral granting institutions, less than half offered book workshops (41.8%) or research leave (43.6%).

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS IN THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS

In conclusion, although we have largely avoided providing advice on how to negotiate, we would like to draw attention to several factors that should be kept in mind when asking for and considering offers. We suggest respectfully and collegially starting this conversation about institutional resources during the interview stage, so that candidates can be better informed about the specific institutional context if they advance in the search to receive an offer. Negotiations should be strategic and tailored to the job candidate and their individual needs along with institutional contexts.

Institutions differ in the conditions placed on the distribution and expenditure of funds. Some allocate start-up funds in a lump sum, whereas others provide an annual budget. Still others may provide a combination of the two. They may also place conditions on when funds must be spent, the time frame of which could be negotiable. Knowing how much you have available to spend and by when is important when planning your spending.⁸

well defined: doing so will avoid situations like that described by one respondent in which the departmental policy of limiting pre-tenure course preps was ignored. Administrators and budgets change, but having written documentation of agreements makes it less likely that these changes will adversely affect you.

Start-up packages vary enormously in their breadth and magnitude, and these variations are determined by many reasons other than just informational asymmetries. Yet, knowledge is critical to successful negotiation. We hope this article gives job candidates a sense of the various items for which faculty have successfully negotiated and is informative as they seek the best possible package available given their context. Although tough job markets and budget constraints may mean that institutions have less to give, negotiation remains an important part of academic life for tenure-track faculty. Our survey results suggest that institutional knowledge can be beneficial in negotiating processes, and our aim in summarizing these findings is to close these knowledge gaps in an effort to address long-standing inequalities in the discipline.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this article are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/EH9CW1>.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. For advice on how to negotiate, we direct readers to O'Brochta and Poloni-Staudiner's chapter on negotiating in Lorentz et al. (n.d.)'s *Latest Strategies for Navigating Graduate School and Beyond*.
2. Because we surveyed faculty hired before the arrival of COVID-19, our respondents' packages were not affected by the pandemic. We expect that since 2020 university resources have tightened, making it even more important to know what resources to strategically ask for in start-up packages.
3. What might be similarly less considered are the tax implications of different types of support. One respondent was advised to prioritize research money over a summer one-ninth, because the former was untaxed and would pay professional dividends in the long term.
4. Unfortunately, lack of parental leave may mean these releases are not always available for research. One respondent noted, "My university does not have parental leave, so I timed my pregnancy to coincide with my third year course releases. So while technically I had course releases pre-tenure, it was not a time that I was able to accelerate my research."
5. Of the respondents who did receive a leave, 15.4% received a full year, whereas 84.6% received a half-year.
6. This may also be gendered. For example, a respondent commented, "Technically, I was not supposed to do a lot of service during my first years, but my department was not very diverse when I got there, which meant that I as a female hispanic had to participate in search committees, diversity committees and was recommended to lead the Women in Politics club."
7. Although the contents of start-up packages may vary systematically according to demographic and other characteristics of the new faculty member, our goal is not to explain this variation but rather to reduce it through the provision of information. We do think it is important for scholars to realize that the availability of benefits may vary according to the type of institution and, as such, will focus on institutions as a source of variation.
8. About one-third of survey respondents (33.4%) could use their funds any time within their probationary period, whereas almost as many (27.5%) had to use the funds by their third year. Only 2.3% reported funds that did not expire or that rolled over indefinitely.

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