

Scientific Life

Creating accessibility
in academic
negotiations

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The process of evaluating and negotiating a tenure-track job offer is unstructured and highly variable, making it susceptible to bias and inequitable outcomes. We outline common aspects of and recommendations for negotiating an academic job offer in the life sciences to support equitable recruitment of diverse faculty.

Introduction

Negotiating a job offer is an essential but often overlooked step when searching for a tenure-track faculty position. In addition to their future salary and benefits, a soon-to-be professor must also evaluate the elements of an offer that are crucial for research and tenure, such as laboratory space, start-up package, access to essential equipment, and teaching commitments. These offerings vary widely among institutes and departments, are typically not described in job postings, and are highly dependent on the proposed research program of a given applicant. This variability and lack of transparency results in negotiations that are inherently non-uniform, unstructured, and open to bias. In general, negotiation outcomes are inequitable based on the gender, ethnicity, and other historically marginalized identities of the

candidate. These inequities are exacerbated by ambiguity, the potential for backlash, and cultural taboos surrounding negotiation [1–6]. In addition, the gender identity, racial perception, and personality traits of the person facilitating the negotiations can affect negotiation outcomes [3,7,8].

We attempt to illuminate this exciting and challenging culmination of the academic search in the life sciences by summarizing typical stages and key considerations in the negotiation process, focusing primarily on research-intensive positions in the USA. For more information on how to prepare for earlier stages of the job search (such as the application, screening interviews, and 'interview visits' that include a job talk and chalk talk) we point readers to references [9–13]. We describe strategies, surprises, and setbacks, drawing from the experiences of recently hired participants in the Leading Edge initiative of early-career women and nonbinary scientists (<https://www.leadingedgesymposium.org>). Although these resources help to normalize effective negotiation by applicants, we hope they also benefit hiring departments. By proactively providing important information, identifying overlooked means to support applicants, and recognizing areas for improvement, faculty search committees can improve their rate of successful hires and their reputation as attractive workplaces for diverse candidates.

Information gathering

Throughout the academic job search, one crucial question will repeatedly emerge: what does the candidate need to run a successful research group? To answer, candidates must look inward and assess their unique needs [14]. As such, we suggest that each candidate should consider the following questions well before receiving an offer:

(i) What do you need to be fulfilled professionally (such as mentoring, recognition, and funding)?

(ii) What do you need to be fulfilled personally (such as family support, financial stability, cost of living, commute, safety, and lifestyle)?
 (iii) What is the composition of your ideal laboratory, and what will you need to support these individuals?
 (iv) What equipment and resources are necessary for your research program?
 (v) How much, and what type of, teaching and service would you prefer to perform?

To ground these broad reflections, we further recommend talking to colleagues and mentors about their experiences.

Even with these personalized needs in mind, evaluating an institution will still feel overwhelming. Candidates will be showered with information from search committees, institutional administration, and departmental faculty and trainees. The reality that an academic career has culminated in this decision and that one needs to be 'well-informed' to enter negotiations can add further pressure and uncertainty. To maintain focus and guide conversations, it is important to remember that the purpose of gathering information is: (i) to identify instances where an offer does not align with the professional or personal needs of the candidate, and (ii) to compare offers to evaluate which would best support the research program and personal priorities of the candidate.

We surveyed a group of recently hired Leading Edge fellows (Figure 1A) to determine the most helpful information to collect for negotiations. From their responses, we distilled a list of key questions, appropriate times to address them, and some typical responses (Table 1). Although it is the responsibility of candidates to ask about their specific needs, search committees that proactively offer answers to these common questions will improve the transparency, speed, and equity of the negotiation process.

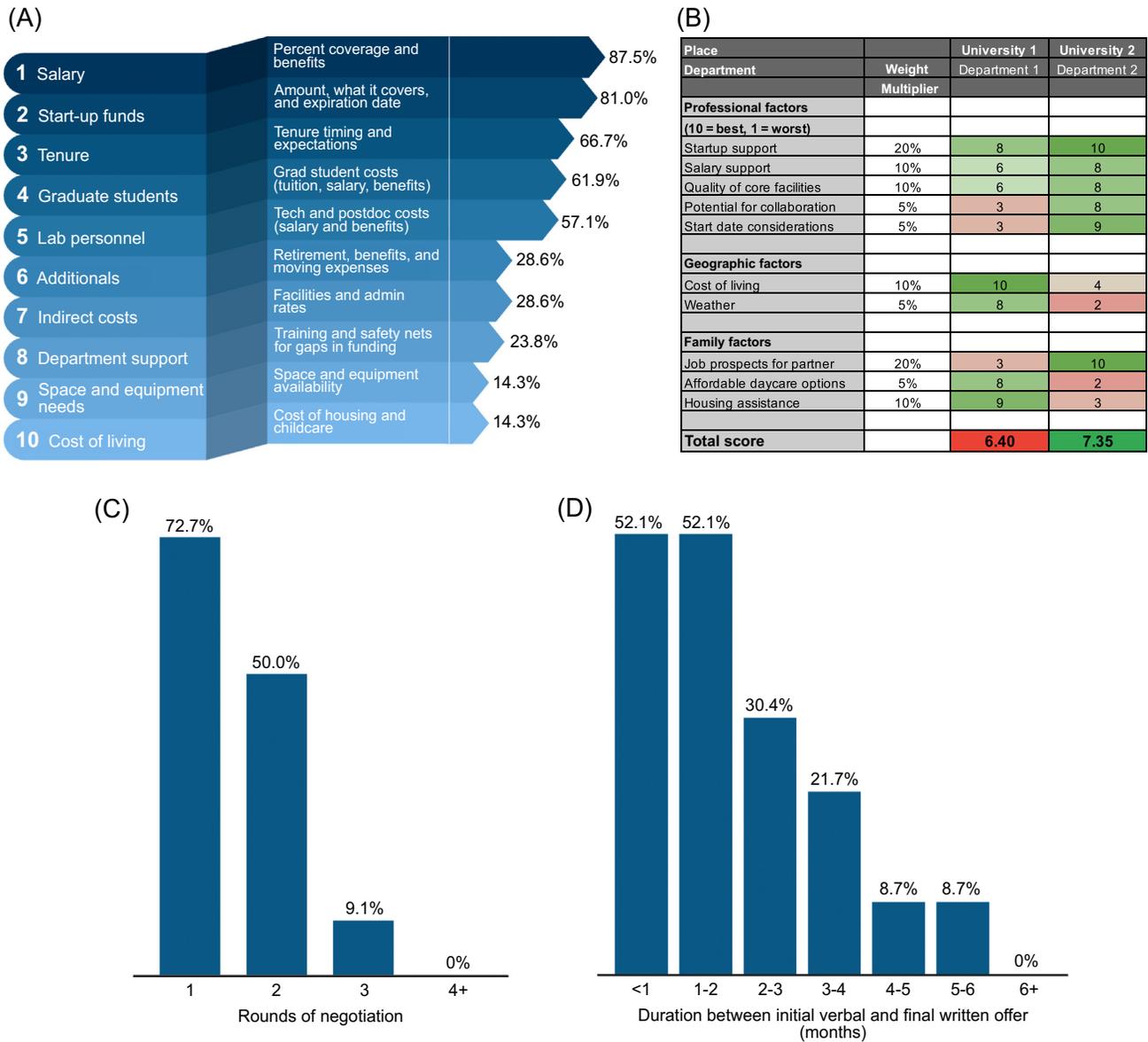


Figure 1. Information gathering. (A) A list of topics influential in the negotiation process. Results from a survey of Leading Edge fellows (<https://www.leadingedgesymposium.org>) who applied for tenure-track academic positions between 2018 and 2022. Participants reported what information was essential for negotiations. Data represent the percentage of the total survey responses ($N=21$). (B) Systematic comparison of tenure-track job offers. An example of an organizational spreadsheet that allows the candidate to list personal and professional needs (in light grey) includes a multiplier to help to prioritize these needs (in white) and assess the strengths and weaknesses of each position using a scoring system (1–10, low to high, in red to green). (C,D) Negotiation statistics. Results from a survey of Leading Edge fellows. Participants reported how many rounds of negotiation were experienced (29 responses collected from 22 individuals due to multiple offers) and how long the negotiation process took between the initial verbal offer and preparation of the final written document (40 responses collected from 23 individuals due to multiple offers). Data represent the percentage of applicant experiences. Figures were generated using Vizzlo and Excel.

To help organize this information, we recommend that candidates systematically compare what they learn about each institution in a spreadsheet (Figure 1B).

This spreadsheet will allow candidates to include all their professional and personal needs, allocate importance multipliers to each factor to distinguish crucial 'needs'

from desirable 'wants', and score each offer. Such tools are living documents, and each stage of the search process will likely result in new data, questions, and

Table 1. Negotiation considerations for incoming faculty members

Information to acquire ^a	Example situations or responses ^b	When to ask?
Salary		
What proportion of salary is paid by the department? For how long? Is this salary included in my startup? ^c	(Primarily) Hard money: 75% of your salary is covered by the department, the remaining 25% (summer) is covered by your grants. For the first three years, the department covers 100% of your salary from your startup (Primarily) Soft money: 35% of your salary is covered by the department, the remaining 65% is covered by your grants. The department covers 100% of your salary for the first 3 years, separate from your startup	First visit
What is the base salary of the most recently hired assistant professors in the department? When was the last time this salary was adjusted for inflation? ^c	Current range of salaries in the division Exact salaries of the last five offers For public universities, one may be able to check salaries in publicly available online databases	Second visit During negotiations
What happens if I bring in more than the stipulated percentage of salary via grant funding?	With expectations of covering 50% of your salary via grants, you cover 75%; the extra 25% of your salary might be returned to you as (i) bonus salary, (ii) discretionary funds for your research, (iii) funds for the department, or (iv) there may not be any monetary incentives to exceed expectations	Second visit During negotiations
Laboratory members		
How are students in the department paid, and for how long? ^c	The department pays students for the first year, but afterward your grants cover their salaries and their incidentals The department pays students for the duration of their time in the graduate program	First visit Second visit
What is the total cost of various laboratory personnel (graduate student, postdoc, technician, staff scientist)? How are salaries set, and what are the fringe rates?	Graduate student tuition is waived; you are not responsible for paying it Fringe rates for graduate students, postdocs, and staff are X%, Y%, and Z% Salaries for technicians are fixed based on the level of their position Staff salaries are often provided as a range relative to the mean for this position	Second visit During negotiations
How do I become part of graduate student programs? What expectations come with joining each graduate program?	You are automatically added to the departmental program(s) You must apply to join other graduate student programs You need a secondary appointment to join a program run by another department	First visit Second visit During negotiations
How difficult or easy is it to recruit personnel to this institute?	It is easy; this location is a hub for many industries and attracts personnel and their partners for various reasons It is more difficult, but the cost of living and the style of life are still attractive to many individuals	Second visit During negotiations
Startup and start date		
Do startup funds expire? Are there any funds available to me outside my startup?	No, you can use them as discretionary funds forever Yes, the remaining start-up is lost when tenure is awarded or within five years There are separate funds for professional development or shared resources	First visit
When is my proposed start date? ^c	You determine your start date Starting in the fall of the current calendar year Starting in the next calendar year Starting in the fall of the following calendar year	Second visit During negotiations
Teaching		
What are the teaching expectations for the department? ^c	Co-teach one quarter per year Teach one introductory course and one seminar course per year Teach three courses per year No teaching expectations, but some teaching is required for tenure	First visit Second visit

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Table 1. (continued)

Information to acquire ^a	Example situations or responses ^b	When to ask?
Is there a teaching release? For how long? ^c	One quarter teaching release One and a half years teaching release Timing of release is your choice	First visit Second visit During negotiations
Will my teaching be supported by teaching assistants (TAs)?	Yes, one for each class Only for undergraduate classes, but a team of TAs will be provided for large classes	Second visit During negotiations
Will I be teaching undergraduate or graduate students?	As college faculty, you teach one undergraduate course and one graduate course As medical school faculty, you teach one course to medical students As medical school faculty, you co-teach one graduate course	First visit Second visit
Will I be expected to develop any new courses? Will I take over or co-teach a course from someone else? ^c	You will develop a new course on a topic of your choice for advanced graduate students You will co-teach a course with another faculty member	Second visit During negotiations
How are teaching assignments made? How many years will I teach the same class? ^c	Your department chair makes teaching assignments, but your preferences are taken into consideration	First visit Second visit
Space and equipment		
Is there laboratory space that I can move into? Can I see this laboratory space on my visit? Is there office space for me and my laboratory members? ^c	No, the new building opens on X date, and your laboratory space will be there; we can show you a blueprint Yes, we expect you to be assigned to X room but cannot say this for sure Yes, this is the room number for your space. It is 700 sq ft Yes, but your specialized space (PCR room, tissue culture room) is not yet ready There is office space for you – it is adjacent to your laboratory space Your office space is on a different floor than your laboratory There is a shared laboratory office space for your laboratory members	Second visit During negotiations
Does my laboratory space require renovations? Who will cover the cost if so? How long will the renovations take and is there temporary space in the meantime? ^c	No, your laboratory space is move-in ready If you require additional renovations, these will come from your start-up funds Yes, the department will cover all renovation costs; we expect this will take X weeks and you will be assigned a temporary space If the renovations are not completed in time, we will add that time to your tenure clock	Second visit During negotiations
Where will my tissue culture/chemical hood/cold room/animal facilities/CO ₂ lines etc. be located?	They will be in your laboratory space They will be on the same floor as your laboratory and shared with one other group	Second visit During negotiations
Will my laboratory have access to X shared equipment? May I see the schedule for X shared equipment for next week to evaluate availability? ^c	You will have access to existing shared facilities, with these usage statistics The core is working on acquiring this item, and you would be able to use it	Second visit During negotiations
Who will pay for this specialized piece of equipment I need for my research program? ^c	There are other potential users in the department; the department will pay for the equipment and service contracts You will pay for the equipment from your start-up, but the department will help to offset the service contract fees for the first 3 years. Equipment will be housed in your laboratory	During negotiations
Tenure and expectations		
What are the expectations for tenure/promotion?	Be a leader in your field X federal grants and X corresponding author papers Here is a rubric defining excellence in the categories of teaching, research, and service	First visit Second visit
What are the service expectations? To the department, to the university? ^c	You will be protected from service in your first year; you will not be on any departmental or university committees in this year You will be expected to help to advise a core facility after X years You will be part of the graduate admissions committee	Second visit During negotiations

Table 1. (continued)

Information to acquire ^a	Example situations or responses ^b	When to ask?
When are faculty members expected to go up for tenure/promotion?	There will be a halfway evaluation at 3 years; you will submit your package at 6 years You may submit your package at any time between 5 and 10 years after your start date	First visit
What fraction of junior faculty from the last 10 years have received tenure/promotion in this department?	All the junior faculty in the past 10 years that have applied have earned tenure The last five faculty to go up for tenure have earned tenure Only one denied tenure, for X reason	First visit Second visit
When does my tenure/promotion clock begin relative to my start date? What is the calendar schedule for tenure review? ^c	Your tenure clock begins on your start date Your tenure clock begins in August after your start date; if you start in January, you have 8 extra months Your tenure clock begins in August before your start date; if you start in January, you lose 5 months Your tenure clock is extended by X months because laboratory space needs renovations	Second visit During negotiations
For faculty with dual appointments – which institution/division is the tenure granting entity?	Only one department Both departments	First visit Second visit During negotiations (if/when applicable)
Grants		
Are assistant professors allowed to apply for grants that do not provide indirect cost coverage?	A foundation has early career awards, but they provide no (or small %) of indirect cost coverage The department does or does not support you in applying for these awards	
What departmental and campus resources are available to help me apply for a grant?	Department-level grant administrator Mentoring team or other department/center leadership will read your grants External pre-review services	First visit Second visit During negotiations
Benefits		
How much family leave is provided for new parents under this position? How much leave is provided for caring for parents or other family members?	4 or 8 or 12 weeks paid parental leave Teaching or service release, or other modified duties, during a semester/year when caring for a young child	Second visit During negotiations
How many annual paid vacation days are there?	1 month for a 12 month appointment 9 month appointment is not eligible for paid vacation days There is no formal vacation policy	Second visit During negotiations
Ask to see the faculty handbook for full description of benefits and policies		During negotiations
Department support		
How are junior faculty supported in this department?	There is a formal mentoring committee that meets once per quarter/semester There is informal mentoring that you seek out Junior faculty meet as a peer group	First visit
Do new faculty have administrative support?	Yes, all faculty are assigned an administrator upon hiring No, no-one in the department has a dedicated administrator	First visit Second visit During negotiations
Moving expenses and housing		
Will the university cover moving costs? Housing allowance? Relocation costs? How much and when is it provided? ^c	Lump sum payment (taxable) You are reimbursed for your costs All your costs are covered without any out-of-pocket payment by you	During negotiations
Does the university provide housing or support purchasing a house? ^c	The Institution owns housing and rents at below market rate The Institution has a mortgage-lending wing with below-market rates You will receive a bonus of \$20,000 taxable income to help to purchase a house	Second visit During negotiations

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Table 1. (continued)

Information to acquire ^a	Example situations or responses ^b	When to ask?
What laboratory relocation costs will be covered by the institution (shipping perishables, cell lines, animal stocks etc.)? ^c	The institution pays for your materials to be relocated These costs come out of your startup funds Institutions may also have accounts set up with shipping/transport vendors to help to facilitate these transfers, which could provide necessary administrative support	During negotiations
Childcare support		
Is there a daycare on campus? If competitive, can the department help me to get a position in the daycare on campus or nearby? ^c	There is no on-campus daycare, but there may be someone on campus who can help you to navigate the local daycare options There is an on-campus daycare, but you cannot be guaranteed a spot; however, as part of your offer, you will be placed on a priority waiting list	Second visit During negotiations
Animal support		
What is the per diem of my animals? What are the rates for standard and specialized (i.e., BSL-2) housing?	Rate varies widely based on institution and type of housing	Second visit During negotiations
Will I have a place to house my animals?	You will be provided with X space in your building facility Space will be available for X number of cages and will be assigned to you when you arrive on campus	Second visit During negotiations
Will moving my animals be covered by my department or my startup? ^c	Relocation of specialized transgenic animals is covered by the institution Animal relocation budget is included in start-up funds	Second visit During negotiations

^aInformation the candidate should acquire throughout their visits and negotiation.

^bExample situations are provided to give an idea of possible scenarios but do not encompass all possible responses.

^cIndicates an item that is relatively negotiable in our experience.

updated priorities to ultimately define what success looks like.

The 'typical' negotiation process

Although every institution and department conducts their search differently, our survey identified consistent trends. Negotiation starts with information gathering during a first on-site (or virtual) interview visit, accelerates rapidly upon receipt of a verbal offer, and typically culminates in formal discussion of an offer letter during or following a second on-site recruitment visit.

Early in the interview process, the department may inquire about the needs of the applicant to broadly determine how they can support their research program. However, following the verbal offer, the department will frequently request a more formal and complete 'needs list'. This list should indicate the costs involved in running a laboratory for the first 3–5 years, including research personnel, major equipment (items over \$1000),

and expenses such as consumables, core facility usage, animal care, and sequencing. The most compelling item in the needs list is a budget of estimated costs. Examples from recent faculty hires in a related field and ideally from the department making the offer will be invaluable. We recommend budgets that are reasonable but somewhat higher than the expected start-up funds because most departments will be able to offer creative solutions that reduce costs. In addition to budget items, a needs list should include a description of space needs and other considerations such as teaching and service expectations, student support, start date, and relocation funds.

After receiving the needs list, the department will likely initiate discussions to clarify any uncertainties, find solutions, and plan the second on-site visit. If agreements are reached verbally, it is helpful to summarize these outcomes in an email to ensure mutual understanding. From this stage on, the department is strongly

motivated to conclude the discussion, either with an accepted offer or by beginning negotiations with an alternative candidate. The candidate must clarify what they still need to know (Table 1) and determine the timetable for making and closing the offer, or for requesting an extension of the signing deadline as needed.

Although discussions can progress quickly, candidates should expect delays between talks and updated formal offers because changes may need institutional approval. Most applicants we surveyed reported going through at least 1–2 rounds of negotiation (Figure 1C), and that the time between an initial verbal offer to a written offer was 1–4 months (Figure 1D), sometimes including an intermediate written list of offer terms. In the end, an offer letter will look like a contract and should delineate the salary, responsibilities, tenure timeline, startup package, space, teaching responsibilities, and relocation expenses of the candidate. The candidate should carefully

read through this letter and highlight points requiring further discussion.

Aligning expectations through iterative negotiations

During the negotiation process, it is typical to iteratively identify solutions to any mismatches in expectations. For instance, if it is unclear to the department chair why a piece of equipment or a renovation is necessary, they may suggest that the candidate meet with a department member in a similar field to discuss any concerns. Alternatively, if they encourage the candidate to use a shared resource instead of purchasing new equipment, the candidate should speak with the manager of that resource and assess its specifications and availability. After determining whether this compromise is appropriate for their needs, the candidate may advocate for a different solution. During or soon after the second visit, the candidate may also ask other faculty how they negotiated during this stage, which could reveal non-negotiable items or workaround solutions that may be useful to the candidate. If candidates have multiple offers, they may also ask an institution to match an aspect of their competing offer(s).

One of the goals of negotiations for both the candidate and chair is to agree on sufficient resources to enable the candidate to achieve tenure at the institution. Therefore, to align expectations between the negotiating parties, the start-up package can be placed within the context of tenure and promotion expectations. In addition, the candidate should compare other employment benefits. For example, a lower salary can sometimes be offset by excellent healthcare benefits, retirement contributions, housing support, tuition remission for spouse or children, or on-site child-care. When items are deemed to be 'non-negotiable', the candidate and chair can still seek creative solutions to satisfy both parties. For example, the expiration of start-up funds could be offset

by a teaching release to enable the candidate to focus on grant applications during the start-up period. Training grants can cover the salary of a trainee, thereby freeing start-up funds. Capital equipment that exceeds the start-up budget may be purchased using intramural resources for shared departmental use.

During challenging conversations, candidates may find it helpful to remain focused on their priorities. For instance, to be seen as 'less difficult', applicants, especially women and minorities, may feel pressured to accept an initial or minimally modified offer [2–5]. When these moments arise, the applicant should remember that they are not advocating only for themselves but for the foundation of a successful research program. Such discussions also offer key insights into department culture. Ideally, the department chair should feel like a mediator and ally whom one trusts to advocate for one's future success.

Accepting an offer

Once the negotiated offer is in writing and signed, what is next? If the candidate has multiple offers, they should inform other institutions of the accepted offer as soon as possible. Then they should celebrate and share the exciting news with their professional support system! Afterward, the candidate must establish a plan for completing postdoctoral projects and transitioning into the new position [15,16]. The candidate has spent the past year (or more) planning their research program; now it is time to make it a reality!

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the Leading Edge community (<https://www.leadingedgesymposium.org/>) for participating in our survey. This work was supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (award K99HD097285 to M.M.M.), the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (K01DK126989 to C.M.T.), the Jane Coffin Childs Memorial Trust Fund (P.M.), the American Society of

Hematology (P.M.), the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (K99GM132518 to J.H.K.), the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (K99NS117657 to S.A.), and the National Cancer Institute (K99CA252616 to A.B.M.). L.v.D. is a Mark Foundation for Cancer Research Fellow of the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation (DRG-2372-19).

Declaration of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tibs.2022.10.004>

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