

## Who Cares About Postdocs?

**R**ECENT NATIONAL STUDIES AND SURVEYS reveal that it is usually postdoctoral scholars (typically referred to as *postdocs*) in scientific fields that are the research engine of the scientific enterprise. And, the United States is arguably the most productive scientific nation in the world. So, let's start with the basics: Postdocs are typically those who have finished their Ph.D. but who have yet to transition into a full-time faculty post. It is a period of three to five years of advanced training and a chance to gain experience through the mentorship of a faculty member who can guide the postdoc to full independence and a career in academia. This period of advanced training allows a young scientist to stamp his or her mark on the field, to gain credentials by publishing scholarly articles, and to network by attending scientific meetings. Estimates suggest that there are 60,000 postdoctoral scholars in the United States alone. With this many highly trained people working hard to establish themselves, it's not hard to see the inherent value of our postdocs.<sup>1</sup>

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*This article addresses the needs of international postdoctoral scholars and discusses the particular needs of international postdocs who are scientists (there are also domestic postdocs and postdocs in nonscientific fields). There is a wide range of visa categories in which international postdocs enter the United States, and each institution treats international postdocs somewhat differently—oftentimes dependent upon the visa category they are in as well as the usual level of support the institution provides to that given category.*

However, according to a recent report from the National Science Foundation, the number of available full-time, tenure-track academic positions available is decreasing (this decrease is happening across many fields in academia for financial reasons). Consequently, the postdoc experience is now, by necessity, being refined. Postdocs are justifiably looking for careers in industry, nonprofit organizations, and other scientific sectors. Couple this with the fact that an estimated 60–70 percent of postdocs are foreign nationals and this pool of eager, young scholars becomes an eclectic, dynamic, and very international group of highly trained young people looking to make their mark in life. This unique and experienced group brings with them a unique series of challenges that we need to overcome if we are to fully maximize their potential for the benefit and progress of U.S. science.

Ask any postdoc what their job is like and, aside from raving about the opportunities afforded them to pursue their own research career, they'll also tell you that it's quite rigorous. The hours are long, pay is often abysmal, and benefits comparable to regular staff are rare. International postdocs also have the additional headache of having to obtain visas. Many postdocs may also endure feelings of isolation, separation, and loneliness—going through the visa process can exacerbate these feelings.

Only recently have postdocs made themselves visible by organizing to gain better attention from the

institutions where they work. With the formation of the National Postdoctoral Association, Postdoc Offices (PDOs) have started springing up at major research universities across the nation. Over the last several years, major research universities and institutions have responded to the postdoc community's need for improved support systems that address scientific career development needs as well as health and welfare protections. The NPA lauds this practice and has institutionalized this community by calling it a PDO (post doctoral office). PDOs provide oversight of the postdoctoral experience and aim to establish postdoc policies, from simple things like requiring each postdoc to have an official appointment letter, to more complex issues such as providing health insurance, and even sometimes options to undertake non-lab career training as well as enhance the postdoc's research experience and outcome.

Even simple but important changes like Individual Development Plans (IDPs) can help postdocs from getting lost along the way. The IDP is a tool to help postdocs and faculty sponsors communicate expectations of the collaborative research experience. It is well known that postdocs have long been a source of cheap scientific labor. An IDP assures that the postdoc won't become just another set of hands helping in the lab. Instead, this written tool helps guarantee that the faculty sponsor embraces the career of their postdoc.

Does any of this sound familiar? Of course most readers of *International Educator* know how much NAFSA already does for this community of international researchers. It is NAFSA members who process student and scholar visa paperwork. Other NAFSA members, who help international students get settled and feel welcome, now include postdocs as part of their community because slowly, but surely, postdocs have gotten onto the “homepage” of their institutions. For years, NAFSA members have offered international students’ homestays, multicultural programs, English as a second language classes, as well as a bevy of other services. And now, more and more institutions offer international postdocs similar services and opportunities. At the national level, a new NAFSA Postdoc Special Interest Group (SIG) was approved in March of 2008 and convened their inaugural meeting at the last NAFSA national conference in Washington, D.C. (for more information about this group, [www.nafsa.org/postdocsig](http://www.nafsa.org/postdocsig)).

From another angle, there already exists an organization with goals closely allied to that of NAFSA that many NAFSA members may not be aware of. It is the aforementioned National Postdoctoral Association (NPA), founded in 2003, which represents the voice of postdocs at a national level. In a nutshell, the NPA lobbies for change on behalf of its postdoc constituents from funding agencies like the National Institutes of Health to research institutions like the University of California Berkeley; from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) at the local level—all the way to Congress for visa regulatory reform.

To make the plight of the international postdoc less difficult, the NPA has recently issued a white paper on immigration reform, calling on policymakers and funding agency leaders to consider changes to laws and regulations governing international postdocs. The NPA white paper, entitled *International Postdoctoral Researchers and Their Importance to*

*the Advancement of Science, Technology and National Security* was sent to leading officials in the Departments of State and Homeland Security, along with the leaders of the House and Senate committees that have jurisdiction over immigration policies (for further details check out the NPA Web site: <http://www.nationalpostdoc.org>). To educate and assist institutions, the NPA also provides legal seminars for international postdocs all over the nation, at no charge to the host institution. However, there are larger ongoing challenges for postdocs, not the least of which is to increase the basic postdoctoral stipend to competitive levels and refine salary discrepancies between domestic and international postdocs. Entry-level postdoc compensation is approximately \$37,000 per annum (The National Institutes of Health (NIH) entering minimum is \$36,600 for first-year postdocs).

So, what can international educators do to help?

NAFSA can provide a voice to the growing chorus calling out for change. Institutions employing postdocs need to establish moral and administrative support, creating a postdoc office to represent and support postdocs. Typically international postdoctoral scholars are reticent to seek change themselves for fear of jeopardizing their work relationship, which, in turn, would affect their visas.

For example, at the University of California (UC) system each campus maintains a database of all postdocs at their institution and is able to contact them

to inform them of various issues that might concern them, e.g., career workshops, social events, or visa regulatory changes, etc.

A large part of the conundrum that has plagued postdocs nationally is how can nonemployee postdocs get access to health benefits that are normally reserved for employees only? Although postdoc offices across the nation have tried to remedy the situation, they have only been able to touch the tip of the iceberg. But at UC, a health and welfare plan was developed for all postdocs regardless of their employee or nonemployee status.

At the other end of the spectrum, Postdoctoral Associations (PDAs) have also been springing up all over the United States. These are professional organizations housed and supported by the sponsoring institution. A PDA is generally run by, and for, postdocs at the home institution. PDAs give a collective voice to a local postdoctoral community and work closely with their supervising PDOs to achieve goals needed by postdocs at their institution. Furthermore, PDAs often advocate for the inclusion of postdocs at social, interactive events that enable the integration of international postdocs into the wider community. Of course all of this costs money, but a little financial support goes a long way. That’s because many institutions already have international *student* programs on a variety of topics. So, the inclusion of postdocs is not as costly as it might seem.

I encourage all international educators to reach out to your local institutions and universities and see what is being done to help your international postdocs. Together, we can improve their experience here in the United States. They have so much they can offer us back as the next generation of talented scientists and, as part of the NAFSA community, it should be our privilege to assist all types of international scholars in making the most of their time with us, including often overlooked international postdocs. **IE**

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<sup>1</sup> The National Science Foundation and Sigma Xi Professional Research Society estimate 50,000 postdocs and the National Postdoctoral Association estimated 60,000 postdocs in fall 2008.

