

Report of the Sixth Annual National Post Doc Association Meeting

Boston, MA, April 25th -27th 2008

Summary:

This year MSU came to the Annual National Meeting with the announcement of our newly formed PostDoc Office (PDO) created last January 2008 and with its representative Dr. Antonio Nunez. This shows strong commitment towards understanding the needs of MSU Postdocs. Dr. Terry May, representing the VP of Research at MSU, also participated in this Annual Meeting. Dr. Nunez was representing MSU Provost's Office and Graduate School Dean Dr. Karen Klomplarens.

As same as last year, MSU was represented at the NPA meeting by two members from our MSU-PDA (Dr. Weiqing Zeng and Dr. Ale Manzan Chair of MSUPDA).

Highlights from the Meeting

Every year, there is an increase in the number of participants at the NPA meeting. This Annual meeting was a success. Most American universities were represented with a PDO and PDAs. Likewise, universities from Canada sent representatives from either PDOs or PDAs. This year Canada has created a similar institution as our NPA.

While the focus of last year's NPA meeting was to make clear the importance of having PDO at each University working together with their PDAs, this year the discussions focused on a few main issues. The salary and benefits seemed not a main concern anymore for most participating institutes. Instead, career choices, postdoc guidance/mentoring, motivating faculty, and expansion of PDAs become the main topics.

The introduction of concepts like the Individual Development Plan (IDP) and PostDoc Core Competencies became the main issues of this Annual Meeting, reflecting the need of PDs to be aware and very well prepared for their professional plans and training during their PD experience in order to achieve career success.

There are six core competencies: Scientific knowledge, R&D skills, Communication skills, Professionalism, Management and Leadership skills and Responsible Conduct of Research(RCR).

PDA Workshops

1. Recruitment of board/committee and general members

Many institutions reported a lack of participation and interest from postdocs. Also wanted suggestions on how to change the image of PDA and advertise PDA. The following are a few suggestions (in random order) that might help:

1.1 A survey for postdocs and departments: what are the most important issues for either party, and how would PDA help.

1.2 Invite department chairs to nominate postdoc representatives from each department, and they will become the general members of the PDA board/committee.

1.3 Watch for events targeting graduate students and young faculty, negotiate with organizers for postdocs' participation.

1.4 Come up with a postdoc handbook, for better information, guidelines and general help.

1.5 Start an annual postdoc orientation, for distribution of general info, advertising and recruitment of PDA.

1.6 Talking to individual postdocs for potential recruitment for PDA.

1.7 Organize workshops: immigration, grant writing, career choices, conflict resolving etc.

1.8 Build a helpful, informative website.

1.9 Free name cards (20-50) for member postdocs (online design and service from PDA website), can add in "member of MSU-PDA", can ask for symbolic donation for extra ones.

1.10 Set up postdoc research fellowship and travel fellowship, based on performance, need etc.

2. A lot of progress has been made in terms of the PDAs and PDOs working together. Many PDOs are actually thinking from the postdocs' side, and are willing to take great effort to organize activities (group or individual) for the benefit of postdocs. However, essential players, the faculty members, have been left out. So what needs to be done to get them involved, to get them to listen to our ideas?

2.1 invite faculty to sit down with postdocs for meetings and discussions similar to the ones between PDA and PDO, to find out what the discrepancy is: maybe different perception of expectations on benefits, salary, job evaluation, conflicts of interest, training (expectations, guidelines, etc.)

2.2 Include postdoc mentorship in PI's yearly reviews, however, this needs departments' participation.

2.3 Initiate postdoc mentoring program for faculty, and orientation about how to train postdocs; organize mentoring training seminars for faculty, with PDA's participation; form a committee for postdoc-PI conflicts with the participation of PDA?

2.4 Incentives: outstanding postdoc mentor award nominated and awarded solely by postdocs; accompanied by research and travel fellowships for postdocs;

2.5 Penalties (might not work):

--- tie the ability to use their funding with postdocs' IDP;

--- impose quota/probation on "bad" faculty for hiring postdocs;

--- tie IDP with reappointment paper;

3. Career outlook has become more and more of a concern for the majority of postdocs. The consensus is that postdocs need better guidelines for training, mentoring and career development plans.

3.1 Postdocs need to have and follow their IDP (Individual Development Plan);

3.2 Need start (expectations and plans) and exit (evaluations etc) interviews with PIs and departments;

3.3 English language help for international postdocs, contact faculty for postdocs who need help on their English (speaking and writing);

3.4 Career counseling:

--- Resources from organizations: PDA, MSU, department, etc;

--- Seeking guidance from people other than PI;

--- Peer networking;

--- Build and use an alumni career database (alumni become alternative career mentors for postdocs to contact for alternative careers outside of academia);

--- What PDA/PDO can do:

--- maintain a more specific postdoc alumni database (former postdocs who now hold jobs);

--- organize job seminars; career fairs (for example, Bio Career Center);

--- organize discussion panel composed of young faculty, members from new faculty recruitment committee, and former postdocs with new jobs.

4. Positioning and expansion of PDA to lead a more active and essential role

4.1 Recruitment of general member and board members,

4.2 Publicize/advertise PDA: what services can PDA offer to postdocs, faculty, and the administration.

4.3 Initiate and maintain a friendly and constructive relationship with PDO and the administration including the faculty body on campus.

4.4 Does PDA need independent financial support/budget?

A few ways to raise money by PDA: vendor show; department donations; administration offices (dean's office, provost office, graduate school etc); PTO; postdoc "tax" collected from PIs.

Some inputs from experienced Post Doc Offices

[From PostDoc office Leadership Workshop]

This workshop was specifically design to:

1- Encourage professional networking among individuals with similar PDO responsibilities.

2- Provide exchange of best practices and innovative solutions for supporting and sustaining a PDO.

3- Contribute to building a community among individuals responsible for PDO, discuss barriers while being solution oriented

In this workshop presenters were selected with the idea of getting their experiences as they represent different "sized" institutions.

Presenters were:

Chequeta Allen from Stanford University.

Sibby Andersen-Thompikns, University of North Carolina at Chape Hill.

Fran Lewitter, Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research [MIT]

Patricia Sokolove, NIH, Office of Intramural Training and Education [NIH-OITE].

While NIH has 3600 postdocs, Stanford and UNC has 1500 and Whitehead has 140 postdocs.

Highlights from this workshop:

A- All PDOs were initiated after PDA request, overall PDAs were looking for:

1- Central Oversight and Authority for PostDocs. Scope: Dean of Reasearch or VP

2- Support and enhance professional development of Postdocs ie: career services

3- Minimal Salary and Benefits

4- Handbooks

5- Individual Development Plan [IDP]-Some PDO wanted to make it mandatory!!

B- Common numbers:

In average, all PDA-PDO presenter's statistics follow the National profile:

~ 62% international postdocs

~ 60% male

~ 33 years old

C- PDO Mission

- 1- Central register and Orientation. Formal Appointment from PDO.
- 2- Oversights PDs policies. Equity policies? Only 3 institutions have them.
- 3- Minimum Mentoring Standards: Annual Review Required - Mandatory
- 4- Orientation [from twice a year to once a week]
- 5- Certified Career Counselors
- 6- Benefits administration! Key factor for some of them.
- 7- Advocacy and conflict resolution
- 8- Intramural Fellowship awards! Very competitive at Stanford ie;
- 9- Training in Leadership and Entrepreneurship.

D- Notable PDO: WhiteHead Institute

WI-PDO, young PDO that in 2008 introduce changes such as:

- 1- Introduce Child care benefit
- 2- Retirement
- 3- 3% annual salary increase
- 4- Annual BBQ
- 5- Educational awards
- 6- Vendor Fair
- 7- Survey
- 8- Travel Award ~ \$2500 named "Director's Allowance"

Final Recommendations

Our PostDoc Association at MSU was created in early 2004 by a small group of postdocs that were interested in finding ways to communicate postdoc interests to MSU administration.

Although the MSU-PDA has been strongly supported over these years by the Dean of Graduate School, Dr. Karen Klomplarens, the actual status of MSU-PDA is a formal and active association, with a formal Constitution and leader organization but with a very poor participation from Postdocs outside of the PDA steering committee.

We have a website, that has a lot of room to be improved, that has been maintained by GS and will need some more attractive design and a direct access to PDs. It is recommended that PDO office has its own website showing updated home, activities,

plans, etc. PDO should be able to build resources putting emphasis in the core competencies.

Our monetary resources are small and complicated. We don't have a formal budget from the PDA or PDO. Most of the universities in USA have a formal office with personnel and a budget assignment.

Most of the PostDocs at MSU are very willing to attend and participate in activities organized by MSU-PDA but are not interest in doing the organizing required for those activities. We'll have to find ways to apply some of the examples explained before in order to attract PDs, and in order to do that we'll need to get budget estimation.

MSU lacks a clear definition for postdocs, possibly because there are so many titles to name the same thing (e.g. postdoctoral fellow: visiting researcher, research fellow, and research associate). This is one of the examples that lead to unclear definitions in term of salary or benefits. It is important to mention that MSU offers a nice package of health care benefits for the research associates but the range of starting salaries at MSU at different departments is quite wide and unfair.

In terms of overall evaluation for the postdoc experience at MSU, there is no formal evaluation at the end of the postdoc experience and therefore no rewards or honors in any departments oriented toward the distinguished postdocs or research associates. Exit Surveys and evaluations are becoming mandatory for some top institutions in the USA. MSU should do a step forward and follow these examples. We, as either PDO or PDA, need to plan and do a new survey to update our numbers and expectations of PDs.

In summary, we still have a long way ahead of us to go to achieve the many goals which could improve the situation and performance of the postdoc community at MSU and the inclusion of MSU at least in the top 20 places preferred for a PD in USA as it was in 2004.

The creation of PDO at MSU last January 2008 shows a lot of progress and could definitely help in this, and could put MSU at the level of the main universities of USA.

Finally, our recognition and thanks to Dr. Karen Klomplarens for her support and the VP of Research Dr. Ian Gray. The presence of four MSU representatives at the 2008 Annual Meeting in Boston proves understanding and support from our administration for the role of postdocs in our University, as well as their willingness to help us achieve our goals.

Dr. Weiqing Zeng, Member of MSU-PDA
Dr. Ale Manzan – Chair of MSU-PDA
MSU, East Lansing, May 6, 2008