

Report on National PostDoc Association Meeting, Berkeley, CA. March 29-31, 2007

By Maria Ale Manzan, Ph.D. Chair, [and Walid Fakhouri, Ph.D. Secretary of MSU-PostDoc Association \(MSUPDA\).](#)

Summary:

As a remarkable comment, MSU shows stronger commitment in supporting and understanding the postdoc community by sending three members of MSU to NPA meeting at Berkeley. This year, MSU was represented at the NPA meeting by two members from our MSUPDA (Dr. Ale Manzan and Dr. Walid Fakhouri, Chair and Secretary of MSUPDA respectively) and one member from Graduate School (Dr. Terry May) who was representing the Provost Office and Graduate School Dean Karen Klomplarens.

Highlights from the Meeting

Year by year, NPA meeting is seeing an increase in the number of participants. This year all of the top Universities in USA and some from Canada sent representatives from either a PostDoc office (PDO) or PostDoc Associations (PDA) or both. Like last year, PDO attended special sessions at the meeting. PDO representatives (usually Administrators or Faculty staff) were trained in PostDoc issues like, contracts, benefits and visa. NIH, NSF agencies and private foundation were also represented at the 2007 NPA meeting.

Below, I'll summarize the main points:

How to Build and Grow a PDA? What is a “successful” PDA? A group session was established to answer this question and some options are:

- Set goals for our organization. PDAs have a responsibility to inform postdocs and actual graduate students.
- Find a liaison between PDA and someone at human resources that can understand postdocs issues.
- Together with the appointment letter of contract for each postdoc, send also a flyer with PDA existence, information, and resources.
- Break the “apathy among postdocs” by sponsoring social events related to them.
- Annual Report of our PDA is very important to preserve “institutional memory”.
- Creation of an Advisory Board to help to improve relationship between PDA and PDO. Also, the advisory board gets PIs involved in postdoc issues. The advisory board should be integrated by faculty and administrators but not more than 5 persons.

Other ideas included:

- Compensate the PDA leader? Ie: travel awards. Look for ways to continue with the organization.
- If there is a PDO, interact more. For example, University of Washington in Seattle has an Office of postdoctoral affairs, which was created one year ago, and was invited to the meeting as an example of quick and successful interaction between PDO and PDA. Scripps Institute was also used as an

example of an institution supporting 100% of the activities organized from and for postdocs.

PDO function and interaction with PDA. Universities with PDO have been shown to be more competitive. Also, Universities that have a PDO with good or strong communication with PDA show an increase in productivity and overall satisfaction for the postdoc experience.

Some clear roles for a PDO:

- Define postdocs.
- Create a database of postdocs.
- Help PIs in recruitment.
- Establish hiring requirements.
- Inform postdocs about benefits, including different health care and retirement plans, paperwork,
- Assist with housing and visa issues
- Create a database for postdocs.
- Regulate and monitor any kind of misconduct in term of salary, appointment and other benefits.
- Help in the postdoctoral transition to permanent positions outside the institution.

Some clear roles for a PDA:

- Work closely with PDO.
- Provide orientation and information for advanced graduate students.
- Create a strong collaboration with Graduate School to help in the guidance of future graduates.
- Organize poster sessions for postdocs, career oriented seminars, writing grants, workshops as well as social activities to keep the postdoc community in touch and updated.

About General Sessions at the Meeting. I found particularly useful the following sessions:

- 1- The Evolution of postdoctoral fellowships programs
- 2- NIH Pathway to independence (K99-R00)
- 3- Creation of Dynamic program on Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR).
- 4- NPA provides a lot of resources and information about national postdoctoral community and consultant committee for international postdoc for the pathway to get Green Card.

The 3 first sessions were completely interrelated. NIH, private institutes or foundation and government agencies have struggled with the question of what is the best training model for assuring a smooth transition from GS to independent researcher.

NIH, represented by its director, Dr. Elias Zerhouni, is particularly concerned with the observation that the current average postdoc length is 6-7 years. 40-42 years old is the average age to start a career as a junior investigator and to obtain a first grant. One of the multiple options available that is intended to help in the transition is the K99-R00 awards that are available for foreign postdocs for the first time. Other comments by Dr. Zerhouni about awards options were the Pioneer and Innovator Award that are also available for postdocs.

Usually all the agencies, private or national, only offers grants for non-foreign postdocs scientist. For example NSF or private foundations don't have any options for foreign postdocs.

K99-R00 or Kangaroo grant provides a unique opportunity for **promising postdocs** to receive both mentored and independent research support from the same award. Important considerations for review include have a well-defined future research plan. The research plan spans 5 years, so VISA issues must be solved before the start. Strong PI and institutional support is also required. Another requirement to receive the award is to have workshops completed in RCR. Since conducting research with integrity is a critical skill for postdoctoral scholars, NPA prepared a workshop in this topic and informed us about opportunities to apply for NPA seed grants of US\$ 1000 to conduct RCR program on campus. At MSU, this program is already established, and Dr. Terry May is in charge for future questions.

Final Recommendations

Our PostDoc Association at MSU was created 3 years ago 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, MSU is still missing an office that could specifically deal with the interests and problems that Postdoc community has to face.

The actual status of MSU-PDA is a formal and active association, with a formal Constitution and leader organization but with 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. Funds and management of our monetary resources are small and complicated. 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.

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 leads to unclear definitions in term of salary or benefits. Even with this, is important to mention that MSU offers a nice package of health care benefits for the research associates. 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.

In summary, we still have a long way ahead of us to go to achieve many goals which could improve the situation and performance of the postdoc community. The creation of PDO at MSU 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 Dr. Terry May for joining Secretary Dr. Fakhouri and I in the participation at NPA Berkeley Meeting. It proves the understanding and support from our administration for the role of postdocs in our community.

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