2015 Annual Meeting Town Hall responses

1. What part of the NPA or COSEPUP report was most surprising to you?
   a. Nothing was surprising and that was surprising. System as a whole is under-resourced e.g., salary recommendation in COSEPUP – who will pay? Why are postdocs and their career path different from other sectors? Important to research enterprise, and so drive our innovation.
   b. Nothing has changed: use NRSA to set new maximum; COL match; will cause bring in international “cheap” postdocs – come with foreign support; retroactive starting is a problem; postdoc orientation for tracking.
   c. # of postdocs – is it too many?; Lack of willingness to discuss problem; salary rec. – surprised were able to come with # - scalable, NIH driven but not all follow NIH, breakdown by institution (NPA); not required to raise/standardizing.
   d. $80k postdocs
   e. $80,000 in some descriptions; $71,000 national labs; trainee vs employee (T32); proponent of all postdocs being treated as “employees” not trainees.
   f. Institutions that ??? postdoc duration only at their institution; 57% is inclusive of all postdoc appointments elsewhere; postdoc supply & demand not addressed.

2. Were there any findings that you disagree with, and why?
   a. Statistics, as presented, can too easily be cherry picked for the argument you want to make. Little.
   b. Nothing shocking: maybe no retirement benefits; some have to wait two years before kicks in – what to do with a three-year postdoc?; no matching.

3. What are the issues that affect postdocs that were not raised by either report?
   a. Recognition of how different things are at the institutional level or amongst different disciplines. Should recognize how unique some smaller institutions.
   b. Lack of discussion of diversity in workforce, specifically race/ethnicity; other issues – how informal is disseminated to PDO, institutions senior administration, decision-makers; need sound bites for NPA body, slides that can be shared/disseminated for use.
   c. Issues not raised: childcare support – example of postdocs; receiving same benefits as other employees (e.g., health care, insurance); supplementing externally funded postdoc compensation; standardization of treatment compensation for all postdocs with equal qualifications.
   d. Advocacy for postdoc position in the academic setting – postdocs are neither staff nor student; define training – part of PI grant should go towards postdoc officer in all universities. This is currently the case for some universities, but not all.
   e. Training scores and tie to funding, feedback that matters – including data from postdocs (satisfaction with available training); idea – as part of annual IDP, have survey questions (collected through 3rd party website): for each of NPA Core Competencies, did you 1) want training, 2) have training opportunities, 3) take advantage of available opportunities; if not, why, if yes, were you satisfied with the scope/ quality? 4) what training did you want and not get? Data should be aggregated at departmental/program level to form part of a training score that should count for review of all federal grants that include any support for grad students/postdocs (or labor that that have “trainees”) – protect identity of respondents, peer pressure in department, institution gets data about demand for training, grant repercussions=rationale for institutional/departmental investment in training.
   f. Percentage of international postdocs in the studies - that frequency is missing – need to separate out; if limit of # of years – rise in employment?; exploration into research assistant professors? Is this a better option to get postdocs transitioned into academia? (if
they want to be there); issues that underrepresented minorities face; maternity leave and paternity leave.

g. Track financial value of doing postdoc or not (after some time) post-Ph.D.; what’s better – a long postdoc or two postdocs?; why it’s hard to make change – NIH doesn’t allow fringe benefits; outcome measures – what happens when you increase cost of postdocs; why choose to do a postdoc? When is that decision made? More research needed? Comparison to medicine – medicare restricting residents; regulating #of Ph.D.s vs postdocs.

h. Did not address international postdocs – visa issues, pipeline, career prospects; rec on hiring practices and policies.

4. Do you agree that the stipend postdoc salary should start at $50,000 stipend? What are the challenges to reaching that level and the consequences?

a. National level – COLA (living wage MIT) – perhaps regional standards vs national; one pot of $ - what adjusts – discourages people from postdoc unless necessary, rise of independent $; down # of available NIH slots employee classifications could change; institutions=challenge; what to do with grad students? No job available; International postdocs still there to fill system.

b. May make # of postdocs lower - severely restricts $ from NIH grant and how it can be used; is it better to have fewer postdocs as a result of the increase?; great for individual postdocs but perhaps not for funding environment.

c. Yes, we agree; challenges → government cutting funds; consequences → fewer, but quality postdocs.

d. Do not follow NIH standards (federal labs); problem – increasing age, region; discipline-specific – gap between bachelor’s degree and postdoc is huge for engineers, biomed less than engineering; less training vs more compensation; institution-dependent for grad student vs. postdoc compensation/cost; NRSA. Challenges: faculty pushback; funding; “minimum wage”; postdoc pushback; other responsibilities added to research to compensate for salary increase; buy in from institution; no more research grant paid postdocs because of more individually paid postdocs – huge barriers with faculty; less jobs for postdocs.

e. Move stipend level to a livable level to alleviate quality of life issues; 20% below pay level, how do you define training; OMB statement – article in Nature – 100% effort on grants does include training, smart skills.

f. Like the idea of minimum $50,000/yr salary – but worried that this will result in a lot of backlash among the administration; concerns about widening gap in salaries for postdocs from NIH with minimum salary amounts vs. those that are paid through other mechanisms.

g. Challenges – NIH cutting funding, researchers not getting grants; consequences – would hire more technicians rather than postdocs, what would happen to Ph.D.s who are trained to do research?; need to give advanced warning that min. salary will be enacted; market supply & demand will drive # of postdocs; will need to do a better job at career counseling; implication for making changes immediately but make it a progressive plan; competitiveness – Europe pays postdocs much higher than U.S. How do they do it? Can international officer help collect data?

h. A low non-training salary is $52,000 so they would be equitable.

5. Should PD receive retirement benefits? What are the challenges for providing retirement benefits?

a. There are many benefits that have greater effect on the quality of the postdoc experience than retirement benefits (e.g., medical coverage w/ dependent coverage). That said, it would not be an undue burden on institutions to offer postdocs to contribute to their own 401k. That should be a recommendation of the NIH, DOE, etc. to institutions.
b. Benefits, other issues costs of living and adjustments.

c. Temporary status of the position, although this is debatable because five years of time is not temporary from an industrial perspective.

d. Yes: no long term commitment is a challenge; domestic vs. international “matching” social security for foreign nationals.

e. No retirement benefits. But some are getting it. Need to reduce time to Ph.D., then postdoc. Employee trainee can work. Regular employee doesn’t work; quality of life issues – losing track of bigger picture.

f. You have to be an employee to get retirement benefits at a state school. Postdocs have to set up their own retirement savings and they don’t set them up and pay in. Bad/no matching and when is it fully vested.

g. Yes, an example: Georgia State – by law 6% by postdoc and institution matches 9%. This seems like a good model but postdoc position title is under “staff.” But within the institution NRSA fellows don’t receive the same benefits; postdocs don’t receive enough education on retirement options; the salaries are so low already that there is not enough to even save or add money to retirement accounts; how about investing schedules for postdocs – maybe a five year plan? Maybe HR? Maybe from postdoc office.

6. What are the institutional barriers to collecting better data about postdoc outcomes?

a. At one institution, postdocs are in a nebulous position (“instructor”) and administered by dept. rather than institution.

b. Barriers to data collection: utilize HR better/have them be more flexible or willing to make data accessible; exit interviews – incentivize this → maybe withhold final paycheck until interview complete; social media can help track postdocs after they have.

c. Staff member in a postdoc office; mechanism to collect data; definition of a postdoc – must be regulated; link through HR, as a PDO is too voluntary. But getting HR involved may also be a problem. Need a postdoc office first; developing personal connections so they are more likely to respond later.

d. Institution doesn’t fully know how many/who all of the postdocs are – critical to collecting better data; funding from diverse areas makes harder to collect and/or trade postdocs – from example those postdocs paid by NIH are not paid through the same mechanisms and are thus not in the central postdoc database; no consistent job title and/or employment status within a university or across universities – it’s hard to get information from the HR dept; perhaps adding a postdoc.edu extension to e-mail database since everyone gets an institution e-mail.

e. Institutional silos; leads to lack of sharing data internally; need to centralize processes; need top down support; more support at postdoc offices to help collect and synthesize data; have to have structure in place to facilitate data sharing.

f. Training grants do good at making sure that postdocs sign in on exit papers; some institutions tie up the last paycheck upon the condition of completing exit survey; fellows in institutions are ghosts but research fellows are taken care of; suggestions – HR offices should include a liaison in their offices to help them deal with postdocs in a more homogenous way.

g. Institutions not doing good job at communicating with postdocs; no resources for a person to collect data and no incentive; maybe alum office?; international population – avoid sweatshop, PDOs approve other letters; depts. not sharing information amongst one another; transparency issues.

7. What information do graduate students need to have in order to make an informed decision about pursuing postdoctoral training?

a. Many going into or looking at postdocs would do it anyway in hopes of getting faculty job → would that help # of postdocs? PIs need to be taught how to talk to students about non-academic careers and how and when to encourage students to explore career options.
b. Raise awareness of other career paths earlier; PI reprogramming; culture change to eliminate “failure” perception; next generation part of change; remove stigma of non-academic career (NOT ALTERNATIVE CAREERS); faculty not responsible for career advice, but be supportive team of mentors; solution – instructors from other career paths to raise exposure; Need for data on career outcomes.

c. Need for “rankings” based on data – rankings on postdoc outcomes/institutional ranks.

d. Track success of postdocs/alumni in the lab/dept., share with candidates; know options for careers – career counseling/internships (purpose of PhD?); self-awareness – do the internal work, own your decisions; mentor training – not single mentor; rate your PI; clarity on expectations between mentor and postdocs (“contract”); look to funding agencies for stronger requirements (e.g., King fellowship); questions to ask PIs when interviewing.

e. Info for graduate students: same career info/mentorship resources as postdocs receive; internships, external non-research experience opportunities during grad school – have to convince faculty of the benefit of this; knowing chances of success in different careers.

f. Tenure track position percentages; nothing is automatic; made aware you have to choose; finances of being a postdoc; don’t do a postdoc if your outcome is not research.

g. Need better info about pay scale – which jobs require postdoc experience; faculty need better education about careers in addition to better informing grad students; better exposure to what career options are there – including HR people and position specific speakers.

h. Training in first year graduate program about career planning career paths; conversation with emphasis about skills desired; what is career landscape?; salary information for different careers; advisory committee from people from outside academia to advise grad students about skills career paths.

i. Is a postdoc necessary for their ultimate career goal? Have committees also ask about career track, but they need to be willing to hear the answer. If a postdoc is needed, what kind of postdoc is required for their career goal.

j. Info on management style of PIs; career outcomes info; info about other options.

Not sure what questions these comments apply to:

- The salary is a life sciences issues. It is higher for engineers and computer scientists.
- Importance of social scientists in gathering data on impact of postdocs on career trajectory.
- Should the biological sciences model (multiple, longer postdocs) be applied to the social sciences? Training (+ time for writing) vs labor for someone else (+ extra teaching and service).
- Should we abolish the idea that postdoc is “training”? If we were treated more like employees rather than the “trainee” status and this status keeps us subordinate. Formal contract to say that there is a contract, of limited term. Retirement benefits should be mandatory. Disparate titles for postdocs should be illegal.
- Do grad students have access to career advisement resources? Role of disciplinary societies?
- Postdoc viewpoint, mentoring, NIH has mentoring retreat, mentor survey.