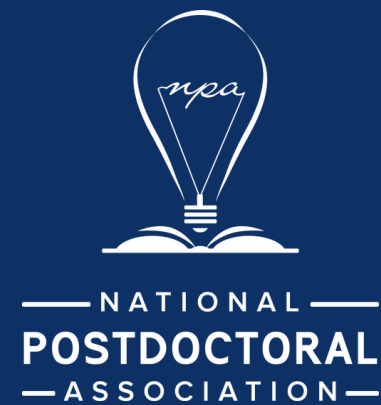

NATIONAL POSTDOCTORAL ASSOCIATION

WHAT IS A POSTDOC?



DEFINITION

post·doc (*pōs(t)däk*) *n.*

A postdoctoral scholar ("postdoc") is an individual holding a doctoral degree who is engaged in a temporary period of mentored research and/or scholarly training for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of his or her choosing.



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BACKGROUND

It is estimated that there are approximately **70,000 postdocs** involved in research in the United States (*Growing Progress in Supporting Postdocs: 2021 National Postdoctoral Association Institutional Policy Report*).

Postdoc positions have become the *de facto* next career step following the receipt of a doctoral degree in many disciplines.

In these positions, postdocs typically perform research under the supervision and mentorship of a more senior researcher, often called the postdoctoral advisor.

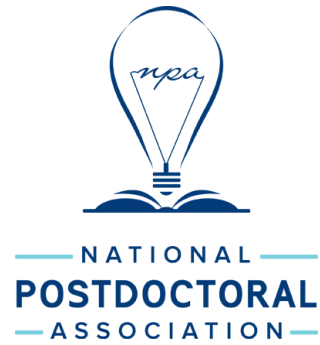
The key characteristic of a postdoc position is that it is a temporary career-building step on the path to a more permanent position.

Postdoctoral appointees can pursue

**BASIC, CLINICAL OR
TRANSLATIONAL
PROJECTS**

*so long as their primary effort is devoted
toward their*

OWN SCHOLARSHIP



*Postdocs are essential
to the scholarly mission
of the mentor and host
institution*



and thus are expected to have the freedom to publish the results of
their scholarship.

TENETS OF A PROPER POSTDOC EXPERIENCE



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Transition to career independence through the development of professional skills that enable the postdoc to actively pursue a career of his/her own choosing.

Supervision by at least one senior scholar who actively promotes the postdoc's professional development.

An individual development plan (IDP) that incorporates equally the postdoc's career and training goals and the mentor's research goals.

Pursuit of basic, clinical, or translational projects so long as effort is focused primarily on research.

Publication of the results of the postdoc's research and scholarship during their appointment.

As the postdoctoral appointment is temporary by nature, the aggregate amount of time spent as a postdoc is recommended to not exceed five years (not including family medical leave or maternity/paternity leave).

As postdocs are important members of the host institution's community, appropriate levels of compensation, health care, and other benefits commensurate with their essential status should be afforded, independent of the postdoc's source of funding.



NATIONAL POSTDOCTORAL CORE COMPETENCIES

**BEFORE AN INSTITUTION CAN SET POLICY
GUIDELINES CONCERNING ITS POSTDOCS, IT IS
ESSENTIAL FOR THE INSTITUTION, IN
CONJUNCTION WITH THE PDO, TO DEVELOP A
CLEAR DEFINITION OF A POSTDOCTORAL
SCHOLAR.**

There are several issues to consider in developing a definition, including the scientific expectations of postdoctoral scholars, their institutional status and the duration of the postdoctoral appointment.

DEFINING POSTDOC INSTITUTIONAL STATUS

Postdoc Terms:

- Postdoc Fellow
- Postdoc Associate
- Postdoc Staff
- Postdoc Researcher

Postdocs can be paid by two different mechanisms:

- 1) a *salary*, directly from the institution (usually derived from a supervisor's grant or other funds)
- 2) a *stipend*, independent funding by a fellowship of some type

Subdivide the postdoc pool into two sub-populations for Human Resources and Payroll/Benefits purposes

Postdocs may not fall under the umbrella term of employee, but rather as a special category of temporary employee

- Some institutions may not wish to grant postdocs the same benefits as longer-term employees for this reason
- Many institutions are resistant to the idea of a short-term employee being eligible for a retirement package

Ensuring that the two different sub-populations of postdocs get equal benefits can require some negotiation

- Postdocs that are paid by a salary mechanism can often be considered equivalent to employees
 - Entitled to a standardized set of benefits (for example: healthcare, life insurance and personal days)
- Postdocs in the stipend category are generally not entitled to any benefits, as they are not paid by institutional funds
 - Postdocs paid by stipends can be eligible for enrollment in institutional healthcare programs, but are unable to qualify for benefits such as life insurance, which are directly tied to salaries
 - Postdoc stipends can be directly supplemented with institutional money (which can sometimes be necessary in order to equalize the stipend with a salary), this entitled them to salary-associated institutional benefits



DURATION OF POSTDOCTORAL STATUS

A postdoctoral appointment is a temporary one, as postdocs are still at the training stage of their careers, looking to acquire the skill sets to serve them well on their chosen career paths. It is therefore important for Postdoc Offices to set guidelines for the duration of a postdoctoral appointment at their institutions.

At the COSEPUP Convocation on Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience held in 2000, a recommendation was made to limit the duration of a postdoctoral appointment to **five years**, summing the total time spent in all institutions.



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