Focus Group Findings

Challenges in Retention of Women

The goal of the focus groups was to examine the factors influencing the career choices of female postdocs in order to learn more about potential strategies that could help them continue an academic research career.

Four Focus Groups with a Total of 54 Participants

• Group 1: Former postdoc women who were recipients of ADVANCE fellowships
• Groups 2 & 3: Former postdoc women who worked in the United States on a temporary visa during one or more of their postdoc positions (international postdocs)
• Group 4: Current postdoc women in the social, behavioral and economic (SBE) science (primarily Minority Postdoctoral Research Fellows).

Groups 1-3 were conducted remotely via teleconference and Web forum in September 2010. The final focus group was conducted in-person in October 2010. Based on the lack of risk involved in the discussion topics, the protocol was determined to qualify for IRB exemption by the Western Institutional Review Board (wirb.com).

Participants emphasized the importance of culture over policy for postdocs, since postdocs often work according to more informal rules established at the lab/group level as opposed to the institutional level.

Key Findings

• Family concerns loomed large for these women, primarily due to “dual-career” issues with their spouses or partners and secondarily due to children.
  • The vast majority of respondents indicated during the screening survey that their family situation influenced their career decisions.
• International postdoc women have additional constraints on their career mobility compared with domestic postdocs due to more extreme geographic constraints and to visa issues.
• Finances were a major source of secondary concern, since family formation often created additional financial hardships that were hard to manage on a postdoc salary (e.g. childcare costs, mortgages, “supporting the family”).
  • For some participants, their low postdoc salary made them feel that they had less influence or “say” in family decisions to relocate for the sake of their postdoc, thereby limiting their job mobility.
• Participants talked about various struggles with the “postdoc clock,” namely the unspecified, but limited amount of time one should be a postdoc. Despite the uncertainty in this timescale, participants seemed to have a good notion of how long was “too long,” with several noting that they had been a postdoc longer than they had intended.
• A common concern for participants was being in “limbo” or having a lack of clear status and in many cases this concern was linked to feelings of isolation and lack of confidence.
  • The lack of status issue was particularly resonant for the group of current postdocs in the SBE sciences.
• Mentoring issues are invariably intertwined with supervisor, or “PI,” issues, as postdoctoral supervisors continue to serve as postdocs’ primary mentors.

Postdoc women experience challenges that are similar for women at many career stages. The structure and timing of the postdoc position, however, further complicate these challenges.

The structural aspects of the postdoc, many of which are interrelated, included the temporary nature of postdoctoral positions, the duration of postdoctoral training, the relative isolation and lack of status of postdocs who have closer ties to their research group or supervisor than to the institution at large, and the typically low salaries.

Another distinct challenge for postdoc women is the fact that most are international and so face additional constraints on their work-family balance due to immigration issues. As postdoctoral training becomes a more common career step in many disciplines, family formation and its inherent challenges will increasingly occur during the postdoc years.

Promising Practices

Participants had experienced a number of practices they thought were beneficial:
• Professional society professional development programs;
• Institutional professional development programs;
• Grant writing experience (usually informal or closely mentored);
• Career plans;
• Information sessions on visas and benefits;
• Informal mentoring and networking opportunities from supervisor;
• Finding multiple mentors outside of the PI/supervisor and also outside the institution;
• Independent fellowships to help women advance their careers, specifically beyond an intramural, like the ADVANCE fellowships, that are available to international postdocs;
• Networking and job search services for partners;
• Paid maternity leave of 6 weeks or more.

Some Recommendations

• Any institutional reviews of policy should include postdocs.
• Educate PIs/supervisors regarding a postdoc’s right to maternity leave.
• Create ways for postdocs on leave to stay in touch with their research community, such as reduced dues for professional societies.
• Encourage postdocs to access to networking services for trailing partners to help them find a job.
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A Postdoc’s Guide to Pregnancy & Maternity Leave

Written by Kathleen Flint Ehm and Amelina Linnenmann with contributions by Cathee Johnson Phillips, Amy Apprill, Juliette Smith, and Laura Kramer

http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/publications/family-friendly

This guide provides general information on pregnancy and maternity leave for postdocs, including:
• Research concerns for your pregnancy, such as research safety;
• Your basic right to maternity leave;
• Maternity leave and federal funding guidelines;
• Maternity leave and salary;
• Making a maternity leave plan;
• Making a plan for returning to work; and
• Talking with your supervisor.

This guide is intended primarily for postdoc women who are pregnant or are planning for pregnancy; expectant postdoc fathers or adopting postdoc parents may want to consult our forthcoming companion guides on paternity and adoption leave.

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