ONBOARDING INTERNATIONAL POSTDOCS

A GUIDE FOR LEADERS IN POSTDOCTORAL OFFICES, ASSOCIATIONS, AND ADJACENT SERVICES
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Acknowledgments
International postdocs face specific challenges that might not be addressed in the usual onboarding processes offered by their institutions. Most of the time, the information specifically designed for international postdocs only covers compliance with their immigration status. As a result, much is left out regarding settling down in a new country, understanding the everyday life in the United States, finding professional development opportunities, advocating for themselves, or creating a community in which they and their families can thrive.

The topics presented in this Onboarding International Postdocs guide are based on our team’s experiences as current or former international postdocs. The ultimate goal of the guide is to help international postdocs in their transition to a new life in the United States. By offering a detailed approach to topics relevant to onboarding international postdocs, we hope you can better understand their needs and provide more focused recommendations to the international postdocs at your institution.
This guide has been conceived as an educational tool for everyone in the field of postdoctoral affairs. It contains detailed recommendations aimed to improve the experience of international postdocs and to better organize your onboarding sessions, website, handbook, and the instructional materials you share with your postdocs. If you are a seasoned leader in the field, some topics may be already familiar to you. If this is the case, use this guide as an organized collection of themes and recommendations you can consult when advocating for international postdocs at your institution and the national level.

There are five content sections in this guide. They cover topics such as living in the United States, navigating campus services, engaging in professional development, creating a community, and learning about immigration. There is a sixth section offering instructional one-page checklists that your international postdocs can use at different stages of their onboarding. You can share these checklists as presented in this guide or use them as a template to create your own. The latter option may be relevant to align the checklists with the administrative processes essential to get settled at your institution.

If information is missing or misleading, please contact the NPA International Taskforce at international@nationalpostdoc.org. We will be revising this document based on your input.

Paola Cépeda, Ph.D. (editor)
May 2023
For international postdocs, life in the United States and your institution’s region may differ greatly from their lives in their country of origin. Thus, having the right information is very important to acclimate and progressively integrate into their new communities. This section is intended to help you offer support to your postdocs by providing basic information that may be taken for granted.
The United States and your region

International postdocs' impressions of the United States might be a product of social media and the entertainment industry. These impressions can be imprecise, fragmentary, biased, or even untrue. For example, some international postdocs might believe their cultures are very similar to the lifestyle in the United States and anticipate a smooth integration, but upon arrival, they might be shocked when realizing that the pace and style of life in your institution's region differ from their expectations. To mitigate this, provide new postdocs with information about living in the United States in an easily accessible manner, including information about the local habits as well.

How to get to campus?

Does your institution provide transportation from the nearby airport or train station?

Share the information with your postdocs!

Daily life

Explain important U.S. culture and society features, such as individualism, time consciousness, informality, politeness, etc. Then describe relevant values and traditions of your local area (e.g., festivals, free public services). Offer guidance for basic first steps, such as getting a U.S. phone number, opening a bank account, handling utilities and other bills, writing checks, apps for food or transportation, etc.

Holidays

Provide a list of local and federal holidays as well as cultural and religious recurrences observed. If possible, include a short description about their origin, the day they recur, and the typical celebrations (e.g., the fireworks on Independence Day).

Make sure to specify which ones are observed at your institution as paid holidays or days off and which ones are not.
Socio-political context

Many aspects of our daily lives in the United States seem so obvious to us that we forget that the new members of our communities may have no idea how these aspects unfold. One example is the difference between federal, state, and local governments.

Issues relevant for your international postdocs under the federal government's jurisdiction are immigration, social security, civil rights, patent and copyright laws, among others. Issues of interest for your international postdocs under the state government's jurisdiction are family matters, licenses (e.g., their driver's license), property (e.g., their car registration), and contracts, among others. Meanwhile, issues such as home leases and parking regulations are often under the jurisdiction of a local (city or county) government.

It would be very informative if you explained the political tendencies of your state or local representatives. These may determine why certain laws are in effect only in your state or a group of states.

Freedom of speech is a paramount right of this country, but sadly, some people hide their hate speech behind it. Your international postdocs should be aware from the beginning that they may face discrimination based on their country of origin, the color of their skin, their religious practices, their accent, and other crucial components of their identity.

Share information about the rates of criminal activity in your local area. Offer directions to the campus police or the closest police station. If possible, collaborate with the English language program or center at your institution to run a workshop on calling 911 or reporting a crime at the police station.
USCIS

Your international postdocs' immigration status is managed by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS), the U.S. Department of Homeland Security agency. In addition, J-1 scholars are sponsored by an exchange program that is designated as such by the U.S. Department of State. Inform your international postdocs that the international office at your institution ensures compliance with federal regulations; it does not provide legal advice on immigration options.

Take some time to educate yourself about common immigration matters that affect your international postdocs. You do not have to become an expert; just aim to understand the general picture to serve them better. Meet with an international office advisor at your institution and ask questions. Section 5 offers you some pointers about what to ask.

Senators and congressional representatives

Few know that the United States senators and congressional representatives can provide assistance with immigrant and non-immigrant visas, citizenship, asylum, and refugee cases. For example, if an international postdoc is waiting for a USCIS decision that has taken longer than the estimated time, a congressional representative might be able to find out the status of the process. For more information, visit United States Senate, United States House of Representatives, or the websites of your local representatives.
Banking

International postdocs need a bank account not only for direct deposits, but also to build their credit history. Your institution may work with a specific bank, so provide that information and include the address of the nearest branch.

Most international scholars do not have a credit score and are unaware of its importance for critical operations such as leasing a property, buying a car, accessing a loan, etc. Recommend that they start building their credit score as soon as possible so they can open credit lines. One first step can be applying for secured credit cards (based on how much money one has deposited in a bank account). With a good credit history with this card, international postdocs can apply for a regular credit card successfully.

Consider creating a financial literacy series for international postdocs addressing these topics. You can also offer information about the impact of soft and hard inquiries on credit scores. If possible, provide information about free services to keep track of credit scores and inquiries.

Social Security Number

Your international postdocs are most likely arriving in the United States without a Social Security Number (SSN). Some may not even know they need an SSN. Make sure you provide information about the application process, the required documents, and the location of the closest Social Security Administration office.

Unlike similar documents in other countries, the SSN must not be divulged, and the card is not to be carried by the individual. To help your postdocs protect themselves from scammers, share some Social Security Administration resources in case of threats such as identity theft or a compromised SSN.

Most postdocs' dependents on a dependent visa are ineligible for an SSN. If so, these dependents should each get a letter from the Social Security Administration stating their ineligibility. This letter is only valid for 30 days. Ineligible dependents will need the letter to get a driver’s license, state ID, or a tax identification number.
Taxes

International postdocs may not be familiar with the United States tax system, and you may need to provide resources on this matter. Unlike in many other countries, income (salary or stipend) is taxable by the federal government. Depending on your institution's location or postdoc's city of residence, it may also be taxable by the state or local city. If so, their yearly gross income will end up being lower than the pre-tax income listed in their offer letter or contract, which has a significant impact on the financial decisions they need to make. This may also apply to signing bonuses, monetary awards, or relocation expenses. In the United States, people usually talk about salaries, stipends, prices, and similar assuming pre-tax amounts, as opposed to many countries' practice of referring to the final amount. You can direct postdocs to online tools that give them an idea of how much will be deducted from their paycheck (e.g., this salary paycheck calculator).

Point out that income taxes need to be filed annually before Tax Day (typically, around April 15th). Send reminders to all your postdocs about the approaching deadlines to submit their tax return.

Some countries have a tax treaty with the United States, so their citizens could be paying significantly lower taxes. Direct international postdocs to Internal Revenue Service (IRS) list of countries with income tax treaties for more information.

International postdocs with dependents (spouse or children) may need practical information about what an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN). Dependents who are ineligible for an SSN have to get an ITIN. The ITIN is used for tax purposes only and allows them to include their dependents on their tax return, which may give them access to tax credits and deductions.

Does your institution offer a tax clinic or other support related to preparing and filing a tax return?

Share the information with your postdocs!
Taxes may vary significantly from one visa category to another, especially among those who have been in the United States for only a short period. For example, some of your postdocs on J-1 status may be considered as non-resident aliens for tax purposes; thus, they may qualify for a FICA (Federal Insurance Contributions Act) exemption if they are in the first two calendar years from the date they entered the United States using a J-1 non-student visa. Make sure international postdocs understand that their paychecks may significantly decrease after two calendar years due to additional tax deductions as they automatically switch categories to resident alien for tax purposes.

Tax information relevant to your international postdocs may include:

- The American tax system broadly
- Tax treaties with foreign countries
- Filing status for tax purposes (different from immigration status)
- Documents they will receive from your institution (e.g., Form W-2, Form 1042-S) to prepare a tax return
- Contact details of an officer in the financial service department for questions or concerns
- How to file an income tax form, including paid or free online services that could be used
- How to request a filing extension, in case it is needed
- Upcoming tax filing workshops at your institution

Your institution may subscribe to a specific third-party platform (e.g., Glacier Tax Compliance or similar) that helps foreign employees who are non-resident aliens for tax purposes calculate and file their income tax return. If so, share the links and instructions on your website. If not, reach out to the appropriate offices on your campus (international office, Human Resources, etc.) for more information.

International postdocs considered residents for tax purposes may qualify to use IRS Free File to prepare and file federal income tax returns online for free. State taxes may incur some costs, though.

To learn more, read the NPA Beginners Guide to Income Taxes for International Postdocs. Also, consult the IRS International Taxpayers site and the U.S. Tax Guide for Aliens.
Driver's license

In the United States, a driver's license serves as a personal identification document (ID). Even if someone is not driving, they can get a non-driver’s state ID from the state department of motor vehicles, which has different names in different jurisdictions. For international scholars, using their driver’s license or state ID as their main photo-ID document allows them to store their passports and other immigration documents safely at home.

Instruct your international postdocs on how to get a driver’s license or state ID for themselves and their dependents. This information can save them additional trips to the department of motor vehicles. If the dependents are not eligible for an SSN, a letter from the Social Security Administration will be necessary to complete the paperwork (this letter is valid only for 30 days). Recommend that postdocs request the REAL ID if possible, so they can use this document for flying within the U.S.

Housing

Your institution likely has resources listing on- and off-campus lodging, so provide these to your postdocs. You can also list the contact information for the tenant association in your city. In addition, share some apps or websites that could help postdocs and their families explore some housing options, even if your institution does not endorse them.

International postdocs might decide to rent from abroad, so inform them how to protect themselves from scams. Advise them to contact the people in their new research group or lab to ask about options and how much rent costs.

Explain that when renting, postdocs and their families are referred to as tenants and the home or building owner as the landlord or landlady. Local rules dictate the limits and types of fees that can be charged. For the rental application process, postdocs might need to pay an application fee, submit their credit history or references, include a security deposit, and pay for renter’s insurance.
Health care

The health care system can be challenging to understand for international postdocs. Therefore, accurate information should be provided as explicitly as possible. Here are some pointers:

- Explain the health insurance options at your institution
- Discuss dental and vision plans, and options for dependent coverage
- Be explicit about when exactly the health insurance is effective after the official job start date
- Define technical terms, such as preferred provider organizations (PPO), co-payment, deductible, primary care physician (PCP), out-of-pocket maximum/limit, preventive care, etc.
- Provide information on how to access emergency care and how to use the health insurance offered by your institution
- Tell them about in-network and out-of-network coverage (out-of-network provider visits can result in significant, unanticipated expenses for postdocs)
- Alert them that, unlike in other countries, a medical bill may arrive in the mail after a medical service has been provided if the insurance does not cover those expenses
- List urgent care clinics nearby and explain the difference with emergency rooms (ERs)
- Share that the employee assistant program (if available at your institution) may help them negotiate a bill

Important: Advocate for health plans that suit J-1 scholars

Some international postdocs have health insurance requirements mandated by their immigration status (namely, J-1 scholars). Ensure they understand the requirements and how they compare to the insurance plans offered by your institution. If your postdocs need extra insurance to meet the visa requirements, think about working with your institution’s leadership to find a way to address these issues to benefit your postdocs. If you are in a position of influence, consider working toward expanding the options for health insurance plans for international postdocs. In the meantime, provide information about companies that offer these supplemental insurances. Consult with your institution’s international office or Human Resources for more information.
Regional meals
Offer information about general mealtimes and what each meal usually consists of. Provide a list of "must try" food typical from your area, and maybe iconic places in town. Offer guidelines on tipping, ordering take-out food, requesting a container to take food, etc. Explain that, in the U.S., it is common for servers to take credit cards to the back for payment rather than completing the service at the table.

Recreation
Inform your international postdocs about special places or activities that may be available in town, such as museums, zoos, national parks, stadiums of major or college league teams (baseball, football, basketball, hockey, etc.), famous festivals or concerts, etc. Share information about discounts or offers people affiliated with your institution can take advantage of.

List cultural, religious, and recreational clubs at your institution or in town. Examples may include library activities, English language practice groups, sports clubs (hiking, climbing, tennis, etc.), religious worship places, etc.

Include a link to your town's tourist information website with up-to-date information about upcoming events.

Cultural barriers
Language and cultural barriers could create awkward situations, and your postdocs may feel embarrassed to ask for help. Provide information that normalizes these awkward situations. Gently invite postdocs to reach out to you for one-on-one meetings, where you can privately discuss general etiquette expected in social, business, and academic settings.
Starting a postdoctoral appointment

How postdoctoral appointments are interpreted in the United States may differ from other countries. According to the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA), a postdoctoral appointee is an individual holding a doctoral degree who is engaged in a temporary period of advanced mentored research or scholarly training for the purpose of acquiring the professional skills needed to pursue a career path of their choosing. This definition is endorsed by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF). In short, a postdoctoral appointment is basically a mentored, advanced training stage in a scholar's pathway to professional independence.

Is your institution an NPA Organizational Member? If so, your postdocs get a free Affiliate Individual membership.

Share the information with your postdocs!

Some terms may be very familiar in the postdoctoral sphere and at the same time unintelligible for your international postdocs. Therefore, define acronyms such as PI (principal investigator), PDO (postdoctoral office), PDA (postdoctoral association), as well as those used in your institution to refer to offices or buildings, particular groups, events, or even people unique to your organization.

To learn more, consult the NPA International Postdoc Survival Guide. It offers additional advice for international postdocs, including testimonies from former postdocs. You could also reach out to the NPA International Officers for guidance on resources that might be useful for your international postdocs. Your trainees may directly contact the officers too.
Getting around your campus is essential for the new postdocs at your institution. International postdocs may not be familiar with the general layout of a university or research campus and will need additional guidance when it comes to onboarding.
Campus map
Share with your new postdocs a campus map that highlights accessible and non-accessible gates and entrances, parking lots, and buildings while using the names of major streets as reference points.

Campus safety
Explain the regulations to access the campus facilities during and outside regular working hours. Familiarize your postdocs with the campus police and the escort program if available.

Parking
Explain the types of parking permits available at your institution and potential costs, the location and opening hours of the parking office, the process and the documents necessary to obtain a permit or register a vehicle, the validity of the permit, and the renewal process. Include information about special parking permits for individuals with disabilities and electric cars.

Does your institution or city have a mobile app for maps, parking, transportation, dining or other services?
Share the information with your postdocs!

Campus shuttle system/bus
Some international postdocs may rely on public transportation on and off campus. Offer details about the shuttle services available within campus or across campuses (routes and timetables). Refer to external information on local public transportation services and local programs promoting the use of public transportation if there is one.
Cycling
Information about bike paths, bike racks across campus, and bike sharing programs may be of general interest. Make sure to include important safety rules (e.g., using helmets, lights, and chains), applicable laws, and weather-related advice.

Dining and food
An important element of belonging is to easily navigate campus and find the cafes, dining halls, restaurants, fast-food stops, or even bars available on campus. Share the location of each facility (ideally, referring to a building or number on the map), opening times, and a link to their menu. Offer various options for different dietary restrictions (e.g., vegan, kosher) and whether there is a discount if they pre-pay for their food.

Libraries
Your postdocs should have full library access. Advise them to use services such as interlibrary loan, consulting with a librarian, visiting rare collections, printing, publishing, creating researcher profiles, etc. Some of these services may be uncommon in other countries. Share a list of the libraries on campus and the general rules to access them. Indicate the location and opening times.

Share information about partnerships with food ordering and delivery platforms that provide services on campus, food trucks' schedule, pop-up food courts, or farmers' markets. Remember to mention the off-campus restaurants and businesses that may offer discounts to your institution's employees and students. Information on coupons and cash-back apps (with the correct privacy considerations) can help stretch your postdocs' hard earned dollars.
Accessibility

Become an advocate for a more accessible campus that serves a community of students, faculty, staff, postdoctoral researchers, and clinical fellows, among others, with very different backgrounds, experiences, first languages, and abilities.

Provide information about your institution’s accessibility policy on your website. Also, include campus accessibility maps, accessible parking spaces, escort services on campus for community members with mobility impairments, assistive technology, and other information relevant to your institution. Your postdocs may need access to gender-inclusive and accessible bathrooms. Indicate which of those are compliant with the Americans with Disability Act (ADA).

If your website is not accessible, consult the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), in particular, its Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI). The W3C WAI develops standards and strategies to help you make the Web more accessible to people with disabilities. You can find resources as well as training opportunities to improve the accessibility of your website.

Does your institution have an office for accessibility and disability resources?

Share the information with your postdocs!

For postdocs who require accommodations or accessible spaces, establish communication with the accessibility office at your institution. In addition, contact the faculty mentors and department administrators who will be working along with these postdocs, and make sure they are all aware of the resources on campus as well as external, reliable information. Reach out to other offices on campus for a list of relevant resources.
Postdoctoral affairs

If your institution has an office that oversees postdoctoral training, policies, or community, make sure this information is well known among your postdocs. Some offices may serve postdocs from certain schools or departments within an institution; some may serve postdocs from any school or department. Who to reach out to depends on what postdoc population these offices serve.

Some institutions have an active postdoctoral association creating a community for the postdoctoral population, even if they do not have a dedicated office for postdocs. Provide information about how to join the association and how to engage with its activities throughout the year.

Understanding compensation

If your institution has compensation policies for postdocs, make sure to communicate these broadly to help ensure departments fulfill the requirements. In some institutions, compensation can be negotiated; if this is the case at your institution, consider providing postdocs with strategies on how to negotiate their compensation. International postdocs may be unaware of these strategies due to cultural differences.

Depending on your institution's state or city, your international postdocs' income may be taxable. Remind them that they cannot plan for the full amount of their wages, as taxes will lower their gross income. This may also apply to signing bonuses, monetary awards, or relocation expenses.
Establish an open communication channel with Human Resources and make sure they provide postdocs with guidance regarding their benefits. For example, if your institution classifies postdocs into categories, explain the benefits for each category.

Does your institution offer a postdoc benefits, resource, or community orientation?

Share the information with your postdocs!

Share your institution's benefits
(Here is a non-exhaustive list of potential benefits)

- Health insurance
- Vision and dental plans
- Life insurance
- Short-/long-term disability
- Retirement
- Vacation
- Sick time
- Floating holidays
- Family and Medical Leave Act
- Paid parental leave
- Moving expenses
- Temporary housing
- Caregiver leave
- Childcare assistance
- Fertility or adoption assistance
- Tuition assistance
- Transportation assistance
- On-campus health services
- Employee Assistance Program
- Discounts at shops and stores
Career and professional development are crucial components of postdoctoral training. International postdocs who are new to the U.S. postdoc experience might need help with navigating the system and its requirements. Make their transition a smooth one by providing them with tools to set realistic expectations and start building up their career paths early in their training.
Securing a satisfying experience

Sadly, international postdocs are a vulnerable population to mistreatment. It is part of our responsibility to provide them with the tools to successfully navigate their postdoctoral training experience in the U.S., and to protect themselves in case something goes wrong.

Inform your postdocs about **conflict reporting and resolution**. International postdocs are generally informed on labor laws during the visa process, but no specifics are given in the context of training and research settings. Most likely, your international postdocs will not be familiar with the process of reporting misconduct or harassment, or what offices on campus are able to assist them.

Does your website offer information and resources on how to report mistreatment and research misconduct?

Share the information with your postdocs!

Studies and surveys show that international postdocs are **more likely to face mistreatment** than domestic postdocs. Advise them on how to deal with cultural differences in the workplace and how to identify mistreatment. You could base your recommendations on the [Appropriate Treatment of Research Trainees (AToRT)](https://www.aamc.org/great) document, created by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Group on Research, Education, and Training (GREAT).

Make sure your postdocs are informed about reporting mistreatment, the grievance process, and the resources available at your institution. When dealing with a sensitive situation and needing additional guidance, the **ombudsperson** at your institution can assist your postdocs. An ombudsperson is not a mandatory reporter, their services are confidential, and they can mediate in resolving a dispute.
It is also crucial that you inform your international postdocs about Title IX. This federal civil rights law prohibits gender-based discrimination in any school or other education program that receives federal funding. Your institution’s Title IX office is responsible for coordinating the efforts to comply with this law. Depending on the state, there may also be state laws that prevent discrimination. Make sure your international postdocs understand that, if they find themselves in a situation involving this type of conflict, they should report their complaint to the Title IX office.

In addition, provide your postdocs with information about what to do when encountering unethical or irresponsible research conduct. Research misconduct is defined by federal law and institutional policies as the fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reviewing research, or in reporting research results. Research misconduct does not include honest error or differences of opinion. Your institution’s dedicated office of research integrity will be able to offer resources on how to identify research misconduct and report it, how a complaint is investigated, and how the reporter’s identity will be handled during the process.

Your international postdocs may find themselves vulnerable when a research integrity issue or an authorship dispute arises. If your institution does not have a policy to protect trainees from retaliation for reporting research misconduct or participating in research misconduct proceedings, do your best to partner with the right offices and authorities at your institution to establish protective guidelines and procedures.
Engaging postdocs in their professional development

Both international and domestic postdocs are expected to commit to developing their discipline-specific skills, their transferable skills, and their career plans. The NPA Resource Library offers an overview of the different aspects of enhancing postdoctoral training. Also, direct your postdocs to the NPA Webinar Archives and your institution’s resources. Professional development allows postdocs to keep their competencies up-to-date and be aware of job market trends in the career path of their choice. Instruct all postdocs to make the most of their training to gain their pathway to professional independence.

What other offices at your institution can provide career and professional development advice?

Share the information with your postdocs!

Mandatory training

International postdocs may need guidance to understand the responsibilities of their role. Some specific knowledge and training may need to be satisfied as soon as they start their new position, as these will be required when conducting everyday tasks. Examples of mandatory initial training are orientation, responsible conduct of research training, animal research training, ethical training, health information privacy regulations, etc. Share the resources available on campus to comply with these requirements. Provide a list of the mandatory trainings required before starting to work on campus. Consider tailoring lists for various fields, such as STEM, Engineering, or the Humanities and Social Sciences.
CVs & Resumes

Your international postdocs should know that there are significant differences between a CV and a resume in the United States. They may need one or the other to complete paperwork or access services early in their training. In addition, the common U.S. practices for these documents may differ from those in their countries. For example, a CV or resume in the U.S. does not include a headshot or bibliographical information (e.g., date of birth, marital status, citizenship).

Share your own training materials or those from the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE), UC San Francisco, and Duke University, just to name a few.

Individual Development Plans

Long-term career goals require a multi-stage process that begins with a self-assessment of one’s interests, experiences, values, and skills. For international postdocs, this self-assessment must also include immigration education and goals. With proper adjustments, Individual Development Plans (IDP) can integrate career exploration and immigration goals in a single process. Every career decision an international postdoc makes requires awareness of realistic immigration goals. Tools like MyIDP or ImaginePhD are great starting points to guide international postdocs. However, remember that these tools need to be complemented by immigration planning, whether postdocs plan to stay in the United States or not.
Identifying funding

Funding is an essential component of an academic career. Along with grants and fellowships that have citizenship requirements, list those open to temporary visa holders (e.g., NIH K99/R00). Professional associations, non-profits, and the Department of Defense frequently have funding opportunities for visa holders. Consult the comprehensive database curated by Johns Hopkins University to explore available funding opportunities. Additionally, your institution may offer career or professional development funding opportunities. If so, make sure eligibility is clearly stated to maximize access.

Grant writing

Writing grants and proposals is nontrivial. Both domestic and international postdocs must get familiar with the structure of a grant proposal and the submission platforms depending on the funding agency. Also, they should learn that some proposals must be submitted with the institution’s endorsement, and your institution may have specific requirements and restrictions that must be followed.

Share resources for grant writing opportunities, organize a workshop on types of grants, create writing mentorship circles, invite panelists who have received grants while being on temporary visas, etc.

Some international postdocs who are non-native English speakers may not feel confident about their writing skills in English. Partner with your institution’s English language program or center to address their needs.

Does your institution host mock review sections or other type of mock panels for proposal review pre submission?

Share the information with your postdocs!
Mentoring

Mentors are critical during the postdoctoral training stage and especially for international postdocs. They may "make or break" the value of the experience, depending on whether cultural differences are considered.

As there is no such thing as "the perfect mentor," encourage your postdocs to find multiple mentors, not just their faculty supervisor. To clarify the advantages of a multi-mentor system, consult this document commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. All postdocs should aspire to have primary, secondary, and occasional mentors, as well as peer mentors. If possible, organize sessions where postdocs can interact with potential new mentors, such as faculty, senior postdocs, and staff.

In addition, promote a "mentoring up" attitude among your international postdocs. Help them identify their needs as mentees in different areas (e.g., scientific expertise, career advice, immigration, work-life integration, etc.) as well as gain efficacy in determining what type of mentor would be suitable for each of these cases.

Just as important, learning how to become an effective mentor is one of the professional growth opportunities you can offer. If you have not done so yet, learn how to implement a mentee curriculum and mentor training sessions from the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER).
Building connections

Establishing collaborations and a solid professional network is essential for career success. This is even more important for international postdocs, as they may not have any professional networks in the United States. Therefore, they may appreciate guidance on building networks in their research groups or labs, departments, institutions, fields of expertise, and beyond. When advising international postdocs, keep in mind that building professional connections may be influenced by culture and customs that might be very different from the practices in the United States.

Conferences are an excellent resource for building long-lasting collaborations and networks. However, these may not be as suitable when transitioning to other career paths. This is where social media platforms, NPA events, career panels, and other local programs can make a difference and help to establish first contacts.

Ensure your international postdocs utilize informational interviews as a networking tool to learn about career paths and build relationships. LinkedIn and Twitter are great platforms to keep a professional presence online, build professional networks, and track job opportunities.

Provide resources to maximize networking opportunities, such as workshops, articles, videos, and information about support groups on social platforms that help early-career scholars navigate networking. Direct postdocs to your institution’s resources as well as those in other institutions’ websites, such as Yale University, University of Pennsylvania, Duke University, etc.

Does your institution have resources to connect postdocs with experts in different career paths?

Share the information with your postdocs!
Building and strengthening skills

When international scholars arrive from abroad, they most likely know very little about what their postdoctoral training offers in terms of professional development. Keep in mind that what is considered a "successful career" for advanced degree holders is influenced by family, culture, customs, and even country regulations. For some international postdocs, transitioning to a new societal and research environment can be extremely difficult as their expectations of success may not be aligned with what their postdoctoral training is offering.

International postdocs should understand they are expected to build and expand their skill set, including their discipline-specific knowledge and their transferable skills (in demand in various roles and occupations). You can help them engage in career and professional development opportunities by designing programs or offering information on different growth areas for early-career scholars, such as those already described in this section and many more. Some suggestions appear below.

Skills and training your postdocs may need

(Here is a non-exhaustive list of skills to help you organize workshops for your postdocs)

- Grant writing
- Academic publishing
- Scientific writing
- Mock study sections
- Manuscript reviewing
- Storytelling
- Giving presentations
- Public speaking
- Teaching
- Mentoring
- Curriculum design
- Moderation and facilitation
- Conflict management
- Scientific leadership
- Team management
- Lab management
- Project management
- Data analysis
- Data visualization
- Data management
- Budget management
- Time management
- Problem solving
- Computer programming
- Software competence
- Technology transfer
- Individual Development Plans
- Career planning
- Conducting a job search
- Preparing job applications
- Informational interviews
- Networking
- Interviewing
- Negotiation
- Advancing equity and inclusion
- Promoting mental health
- English language proficiency
- Immigration education
- etc.
Remember that, for international postdocs, planning a career in the United States is inherently coupled with their immigration decisions. Transitioning outside an academic setting has even more obstacles when a non-immigrant visa is involved. Some of your international postdocs may not be interested in the traditional research faculty pathway, yet they will keep their focus on it because there are fewer visa restrictions for academic settings. Therefore, get ready to support your international postdocs by familiarizing yourself with non-research careers that can be performed by individuals with advanced degrees in academic settings. For example, consider roles such as teaching faculty, staff scientist, or academic administration staff or executive.

For academic staff or executive, areas of interest for postdocs may be technology transfer, industry relations, research and development, strategic planning, research management, learning and development, institutional research, career and professional development, graduate education, postdoctoral affairs, human resources, finance, publishing, diversity and inclusion, etc.

There are multiple ways to obtain information about careers for international scholars, whether in academia or other industry. For example, you can advise them to attend NPA events, join affinity or peer mentoring groups, and conduct informational interviews.

There are many career paths that your domestic and international postdocs can explore. Beyond academia, people with advanced degrees are sought after in science communication, science policy, medical and regulatory affairs, program management, data science, diversity and community engagement, scientific journalism, entrepreneurship, consulting, e-commerce, finance, publishing and editorial management, public health, biomedical research, product or business development, etc.

Know any former international postdocs now in visa-sponsored non-faculty positions who are willing to share their journey?

Share the information with your postdocs!
Many international postdocs will find themselves in a new place where they have no social relations and, thus, no social support. Encourage them to connect with peers and local and national groups, and provide them with strategies to cultivate and build a supportive community.
**Postdoc Associations**

Without solid roots in a new country, international postdocs will make every effort to find a group or community where they feel they belong. You can make this easier for them. A postdoc association (PDA) could serve as an embracing, supportive community to welcome new postdoctoral appointees and offer additional guidance while they get acquainted with their new postdoctoral role. PDAs offer a space for postdocs to establish friendships with people outside of their lab, group, or department. The benefits of these connections for international postdocs can impact their sense of belonging and their adjustment to a new country, language, and culture.

When assuming leadership positions in PDAs, postdocs enhance their skills in communication, advocacy, science policy, industry relations, team dynamics, and project management, among others. All of this creates a comfortable environment to foster postdocs' professional and personal growth and increase their likelihood of achieving their career and professional goals.

Therefore, it is beneficial to establish and maintain an active PDA. If there is no PDA at your institution, consult the [NPA Postdoc Association Toolkit](#), which can assist you in starting and sustaining an effective association. In addition, contact other postdoctoral offices or external PDAs to gather their experiences and challenges when creating or maintaining a postdoctoral association.

To help your postdocs build a community, consider hosting a local [National Postdoc Appreciation Week (NPAW)](#) event. Coordinated by the NPA, NPAW occurs each September and recognizes the tremendous value of the postdoctoral community. Postdocs can engage with and benefit from NPAW offerings at their own and other institutions across the world.
Joining groups

Provide international postdocs with information about what groups on campus they can join, depending on their likes and interests. Identity-based groups may be of interest, such as LGBTQ+, Latinx, women in science, parents, etc. Other groups may be academically oriented, such as peer career mentoring, writing accountability, and consulting, among others. Groups can also be oriented to sports, wellness, or mental health.

Advise your postdocs to join advocacy societies, such as the NPA. The NPA offers fantastic opportunities to connect with other postdocs nationwide, increase their network, and establish collaborations. Also, recommend that international postdocs consult with their faculty mentors about the scientific and professional societies in their field that they should join. These societies often have resources for networking, career exploration, skills development, etc.

Invite international postdocs to partake in social events organized by your office or the PDA. When creating programs for skill development or additional training, design cohorts and allow participants to interact with each other as much as possible.

Frequently remind your international postdocs to keep in touch with their family and friends in their countries of origin or previous training. Such connections can provide comfort and reduce feelings of loneliness.
Your city or town

As mentioned in Section 1, keep a list of cultural, religious and recreational clubs in your city or town. From language exchange groups or volunteer opportunities to sports clubs or faith groups, make sure your international postdocs know that their new home welcomes them. On your website, include links to the local tourist information portal with up-to-date information about upcoming events.

Your postdocs' dependents

Just as important is to make your postdocs’ dependents feel welcome and supported. Some cities or towns have fantastic public libraries, with free activities for children and teenagers, English language courses, and creative workshops for adults. Provide information about the public libraries in the surrounding municipalities, including instructions on how to get a free membership.

It might be very advantageous to be informed about support groups for non-native English speakers, daycare, playgrounds, and the schools districts in your area. International postdocs with children may ask you questions about the U.S. school system, parent-teacher associations and conferences, or back-to-school night. Have answers handy that are clear and informative.

Does your institution have support groups for international spouses or dependents?

Share the information with your postdocs!

Find resources to best serve postdocs who support family members, including dual-career couples or those expecting a newborn or a new child through adoption. Share the article Supporting our Best Supporters: Building a Community for our International Spouses and Partners with your postdocs.

Some postdocs may experience anxiety due to the socio-political situation in their countries. Check on them and refer them to the mental health counselors at your institution.
Mental health

Advise your international postdocs to create a support system and identify what topics they can discuss with whom. If an informal conversation does not work for them, your institution might provide mental health services for their employees as an additional benefit. Make sure your international postdocs know it is okay to reach out if they are struggling. Remember that some cultural practices may be dissuading them from seeking help. Assure them that the mental health services are confidential and no information will be a part of any employment or personnel records.

Share the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline resources. If you are concerned for the safety of your postdoc, contact the emergency channels at your institution or maybe call 911.

Well-being

Find and share information about cultivating self-care and well-being. Some institutions organize friendly challenges to encourage physical activity, either individually or as part of a team. If possible, consider organizing events involving physical activities, such as yoga, walking, cycling, or running. You could include these physical activities as part of your programming, such as mentoring while walking, cycling to a volunteering site, etc. Also, encourage your postdocs to practice self-care through regular sleep and resting practices, such as meditation.

Another way to practice self-care is to add a personal touch to a working space. This translates into personalizing their desks and lab spaces (even minimally), becoming familiar with the campus and neighborhood, and dedicating time to cultivate hobbies and interests.
Cultural adjustment

Understanding how cultural adjustment works is essential to offer support to international postdocs who might be struggling as they begin their lives in the United States. The materials you share with postdocs should normalize their cultural adjustment. Acknowledge these feelings and, most importantly, provide some strategies to cope with these experiences or direct them to the offices or centers at your institution that can better support them.

Cultural adjustment is multidimensional. It is not only about being in a new country with different habits, time zones, or languages. It is also about joining a new work culture.

International postdocs might find themselves suddenly underrepresented in terms of their age, race, ethnicity, ability, religion, gender identity and expression, family composition, financial means, or size of social circles. They might also unexpectedly find several barriers which prevent them from quickly becoming an integral part of society in general and their research groups, labs, academic field in particular.

As there are many adjustment levels, it might be more difficult for women, LGBTQ+ scholars, people of color, and disabled researchers to find their place within the U.S. culture due to the intersectionality of their identities. Both domestic and international postdocs are no strangers to social injustices. Issues on gender and race inequities in the postdoctoral community were discussed in the 2021 NPA Gender Equity Summit and the 2022 NPA Race & Ethnicity Equity Summit.

International postdocs also experience inequities related to their immigrant status. Be supportive.
One of the biggest concerns international postdocs have is their status as non-immigrants in the United States. You can best serve them if you familiarize yourself with immigration topics. You do not have to become an expert; you just need to know where your international postdocs can find the information they need.
Immigration status vs. visa

When a faculty member at your institution hires an international postdoc who is currently abroad, the international office will work with a federal department to prepare a document specifying the non-immigrant classification the postdoc will have. This classification is their **immigration status**, which establishes the regulations and restrictions of a foreign national when they are in the United States, that is, what they can and cannot do.

To give you some examples, the document your international office prepares may be an I-20 (for a scholar on an F-1 status) or a DS-2019 (for a J-1 scholar). This document is then physically mailed to the international postdoc. They must present the original document at a U.S. embassy or consulate in their country or a neighboring country to request and process their **visa**. A visa is a travel document added as a sticker on a traveler’s passport. A visa is necessary to allow international postdocs to enter the United States when they present the documentation requested at the point of entry. A visa is connected to the international postdoc’s status, so you may have heard about F-1 or J-1 visas, for example. Find more info on [the U.S. Department of State website](https://travel.state.gov).

As you can see, status and visa are separate notions. They translate into different documents that international postdocs keep with them when in the United States.

Unsurprisingly, international postdocs care so much about keeping their immigration status and visas valid (i.e., unexpired). Their immigration status allows them to stay in the U.S., perform their jobs, learn from their training, drive a car, and keep their dependents with them in the U.S. Their visas allow them to re-enter the country if they have to attend a conference or visit their family.
Types of visas

Your international postdocs may be on different types of visas, which are connected to their respective immigration status. Here we review only the most common visas.

Some of your postdocs may be on an F-1 visa, also known as a student visa. This visa allows them to stay in the country for 12 months after obtaining their doctoral degree. This period is called Optional Practical Training (OPT). For STEM fields only, this period can be extended for up to 24 months, for a total of 36 months.

Maybe most of your international postdocs are on a J-1 visa in the Research Scholar category. There are specific conditions on this type of visa and some international postdocs may be subject to the two-year home-country physical presence requirement. If this is the case, they cannot change their status until they have returned to their country for two years. Your international postdocs can apply to request a waiver of this requirement.

Some of your postdocs may be on an H-1B visa, because being a postdoctoral researcher is a specialty occupation. However, processing this visa takes longer as the Department of Labor needs to certify the labor condition first. Due to this requirement, some institutions do not immediately sponsor this type of visa for postdoctoral positions.

Dependents

International postdocs' immigration documents allow them to obtain statuses and visas for their dependents, which in turn permit these dependents get driver’s licenses or state IDs, and SSNs or ITINs. With these documents, they can open bank accounts, build a credit history, lease a place to live, etc. Depending on their type of status, dependents may even work and pay taxes.
Your international office

Bookmark your institution's international office and become acquainted with the point of contact for postdoctoral affairs. They are a great source of information regarding immigration, compliance, status renewal or adjustments, etc. They will also help you understand how certain policies at your institution may put international postdocs at a disadvantage if they are in contradiction with the terms of certain immigration statuses.

Your postdocs' decisions

Some of your international postdocs may have decided to leave the United States after their training and continue their careers in their country of origin or another country. Some may have decided to stay and be struggling with the uncertainty of their immigration status. And some may have not decided yet, although the data suggest that most international postdocs tend to stay in the country.

Whatever the case, keep in mind that their career and immigration decisions should always go hand in hand. Help them set realistic career and immigration goals and define a plan to achieve them.

Does your institution have a dedicated international officer for postdoctoral affairs?

Share the information with your postdocs!
Green cards

International postdocs who decide to stay in the U.S. to continue their careers will have to eventually adjust their status from non-immigrant to immigrant, so they can live permanently in the country. To do so, they must apply for permanent residence and get a "green card" as permanent workers. Here we list only some routes your international postdocs may consider (consult the links provided for more information).

Options in a self-sponsored pathway for advanced-degree holders include these categories:
- **EB-1A Extraordinary Ability**
- **EB-2 NIW National Interest Waiver**

Options in a employer-sponsored pathway include these categories:
- **EB-1B Outstanding Professors & Researchers**
- **EB-2A Exceptional Ability**

When self-sponsoring a green card, Extraordinary Ability is the most strict category. However, it is the preferred one for citizens from China and India, as the waiting time is much shorter than NIW. Postdocs must seek legal advice from an immigration attorney regarding their specific case. Costs can reach several thousand dollars.

**Immigration Portfolio**

If international postdocs decide to stay in the United States and apply for a green card, they must assemble an *immigration portfolio*. This collection of documents provides evidence of their training, success as a scholar, winning of selective awards, media presence, leadership in scientific organizations, and national and international recognition.

In fact, all postdocs (domestic and international) should collect this documentation for their own career advancement. Use your professional development programming to help them get documentary evidence of their credentials. You should also specifically target your international postdocs and offer programming for their immigration education and future immigration success. [Here is some advice on how to guide your international postdocs in the assembling of their immigration portfolio.](#)
Section 6
POSTDOC STARTER GUIDES

Your new international postdocs can benefit from consulting the following new postdoc starter guides. These one-page checklists can help them address the different topics discussed in the previous sections. You can share these checklists with your international postdocs as presented in this guide or use them as inspiration to create your own.
New Postdoc Starter Guide

LIVING IN THE U.S.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of things to learn and take care of when you first move to the United States.

- Get a U.S. phone number
- Get your Social Security Number (SSN) and card
- Get an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) for each of your dependents who do not have work authorization
- Open a bank account
- Apply for a credit card or a secured credit card
- Apply for a driver’s license or state ID at the local office of the state department of motor vehicles
- Enroll your dependents in daycare, school, or other education programs
- Enroll in a health benefits plan provided by your institution
- Register with a local primary care provider to update your and your dependents' medical history
- Ensure your and your dependents' health records show prescriptions and vaccinations up to date
- If purchasing a vehicle, ensure your vehicle is titled within the appropriate time frame
Onboarding To-Do List

Use this checklist to make sure you are ready to start your postdoctoral appointment.

☐ Check in with your Principal Investigator (PI)
☐ Check in with your department administrator
☐ Get the keys to your office and lab
☐ Locate your office and lab
☐ Set up your computer and work station
☐ Get your badge or institutional ID card
☐ Obtain your parking permit
☐ Report to the international office
☐ Check in with the HR office
☐ Check in with the payroll office
☐ Complete the training on safety and policies
☐ Attend the orientation for postdocs
☐ Join the National Postdoctoral Association
☐ Explore English language program if you want help with your English language skills
☐ Attend to other specific tasks your institution requires from you
Find the parking lot that is closest to your office, lab or department
Pay the parking permit fee
Save emergency numbers on your phone (e.g., university police, campus security, campus escort, etc.)
Even if you have a car, identify the public transportation routes that can take you from home to your institution
Find the library you will use
Identify the dining areas, especially those that cater to your dietary needs
Locate the restrooms you will use
Get familiar with the offices and associations that offer services to postdocs
Get your questions about compensation and benefits answered
Start building a professional network within your field

Get familiar with the culture of your field within the U.S. academia

Inquire about professional development funds

Pursue fellowship and grant opportunities

Learn the specifics of grant proposal writing

Start building a professional network within your field

Get familiar with the culture of your field within the U.S. academia

Get acquainted with the offices and centers at your institutions that provide professional guidance

Participate in professional development programming offered by your institution

Take advantage of the NPA resources

Get certificates to document your training

Reserve time in your schedule for writing and editing manuscripts

Join peer mentoring or affinity groups focused on career development

Review your institution’s policies on mistreatment, Title IX, research misconduct, etc.
Use self-assessment tools such as myIDP or Imagine PhD to reflect on your skills, interests, and values.

Discuss an individual development plan with concrete goals for your first year of postdoctoral training with your faculty supervisor.

Enroll and complete the Postdoc Academy courses "Succeeding as a Postdoc" and "Building Skills for a Successful Career".

Establish a network of mentors.

Set realistic expectations for your mentors and yourself.

Align your expectations with those of your mentors.

Be professional and meet deadlines.

Assess your mentoring relationships and identify what you need from each of them to achieve your goals.
Take time to rest or practice meditation
Get familiar with your campus and neighborhood
Express and share your feelings in a diary or a blog
Reach out to the mental health counselors and support groups at your institution
Join identity-based groups on campus (e.g., LGBTQ+, Latinx, women in science)
Join advocacy and support societies, such as the National Postdoctoral Association
Partake in social events organized by the postdoctoral office or association at your institution
Join the professional societies specific to your research area
Learn the differences between "immigration status" and "visa"

Understand the requirements and limitations of your immigration status

Understand the needs and constraints of your dependents' immigration status

Report any change of address to USCIS and your institution's international office

Communicate any changes in your life that may alter your immigration status (e.g., marriage)

Contact your institution's international office before planning to travel outside of the United States and obtain proper signatures and documents

Discuss the best exit strategy for you when changing jobs with your institution's international office

Plan the next steps to take should you decide to pursue a path to permanent residence

Start building your immigration portfolio
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