Recommended Postdoctoral Policies & Practices (2024)
National Postdoctoral Association
FAQ
(Living Document March 2024)

An evolving resource for the NPA Board and members as well as press and others interested in the RPPP. This RPPP was based on the work of years past, with several versions of the RPPP already developed prior to the 2024 version, starting in 2005. Areas were found to be lacking over time with the former version from 2014, and it had been pulled from the NPA site, primarily for lack of full coverage of important topics. Today’s version is much more ambitious in scope.

1. The RPPP is far-reaching. How can we comply with limited resources?
   ○ These are only recommendations.
   ○ There is no timeline attached to the RPPP because the NPA understands the complexity of the approval and budgeting processes at its member institutions.
   ○ There are many ways to make progress under the RPPP, which is designed to both provide a pathway forward across many areas important to the postdoctoral experience but also to empower postdoc office leaders with a third-party validated set of targets.
   ○ The NPA does not expect any institution to attain all of the recommendations in the RPPP in a short period of time, although that would be a highly desirable outcome.

2. Who was involved in the development and approval of the RPPP?
   ● The RPPP was developed under the direction of the Core Components Task Force, comprised of a dozen individuals from across the NPA membership known for their high levels of activity and engagement.
   ● Both postdoc office leaders and academic administrators as well as postdocs served on the task force.
   ● In areas requiring specific areas of expertise or analysis, committees were tasked, such as the Advocacy Committee, Diversity Committee and International Committee.
   ● In 2023, a member meeting was held in Philadelphia and inputs from the meeting were examined individually to ensure member inputs were considered and discussed.
   ● The dozen members of the NPA Postdoc Council also reviewed the full document, providing feedback in critical areas from the postdoc perspective.
   ● Finally, the NPA Board of Directors, made up of 15 individuals, reviewed and approved the document.
   ● In the end, far more voices were involved in the writing committees and review process than in prior versions of the RPPP.

3. What data sources were consulted in generating the RPPP?
   ○ Existing RPPP, last updated in 2014
4. What did the NPA consider in recommending use of the GS-11 scale for postdocs?
   - NPA sought an annually reviewed system of pay with economist oversight and fair payment by locality, which the NPA and NIH heard repeatedly from stakeholders.
   - Current NPA policy recommendation as of January 2024 for postdoc pay was $50,000. This was far out of date, especially with gains in pay and benefits seen in the last two years.
   - NPA looked at postdoc pay compared to those with PhDs working in nonprofit, government, and industry positions. It also looked at those with recent bachelor’s degrees, which were close to outpacing postdoc salaries nationally.
   - NPA also considered the MIT living wage calculator. Postdocs should not have to choose between paying rent and having a child.
   - The GS system had significant advantages:
     - Federal system in place for decades with nearly 1 million using it across the US
     - GS-11 commensurate with a new position created for individuals possessing PhD
     - Locality pay already well defined by area
     - Rest of US (RUS) scale to be used in areas without specific locality pay
   - Creates greater parity for a full ecosystem of postdocs across nation.

5. How are institutions expected to provide compensation and benefits at levels above $70,000 when they don’t have funds already budgeted?
   - The NPA does not expect immediate compliance from its member and nonmember institutions. It is instead reflecting the reality of the postdoc compensation system after considering the pay of postdoc peers, the compensation changes of the NIH and other federal offices, and the living wage calculations.
   - The NPA does expect that institutions will take these recommendations seriously as they represent the results of inputs and voices from both the PDO and postdoc communities.
   - It is understood that, in a zero-sum budget situation, this means fewer postdocs for each institution.
   - The NPA understands that institutions go through a sophisticated budgeting process that doesn’t change quickly. That said, it is hopeful that institutions will move as quickly as possible to start making adjustments to its current and
incoming postdoc compensation levels to bring pay levels to meet recommendations.

- The NPA also recognizes that most postdocs are paid using federal funds, coming from the NIH, NSF, DOD, DOE, NASA and other agencies. Federal grant budget expectations will need to change over time in order to support higher salaries, or a recalibration in terms of the number of postdocs able to be supported in a zero-sum budgeting world.

6. Doesn’t this mean that institutions will only be able to pay fewer postdocs at these levels, assuming no new influx of capital?

- It’s up to the individual institution, but that is one possible outcome. Again, since the vast majority of postdocs are paid on federal grants, there will likely need to be a recalibration from federal agencies.
- The NPA believes that having postdocs more satisfied in their personal and professional lives is a better outcome than having more postdocs who are not as satisfied or dissatisfied, as pointed out in recent NPA member surveys and third-party materials.
- This is certainly not only the opinion of the NPA. NIH representatives have commented on this in the recommendations issued by its ACD working group, and many articles and conversations in the general discourse about the future of the postdoc position have hit on this point.

7. The NPA is expecting all postdocs to be treated equally in terms of benefits. That can be difficult to do.

- The NPA understands that institutions have benefits systems that may be complex and archaic, and that achieving equal status and benefits for all postdocs regardless of funding source will take time.
- That said, equity is important and the NPA holds that regardless of funding source, postdocs should receive equal benefits.
- Even NIH with a variety of funding mechanisms is clearly indicating that providing equal benefits is important.
- Institutions can look to third-party benefits and insurance providers if this is too difficult under their internal structures.

8. What support will NPA provide to help institutions meet the RPPP?

- The NPA does not want to simply provide a white paper and expect its member institutions to do the rest on their own, individually.
- First, the NPA intends to develop tools and resources to assist its members in moving from current to desired states in making progress against the recommendations. NPA has committees in place to undertake this work and it will not happen overnight. The NPA welcomes volunteers to join its ranks – from the Resource Development Committee to Diversity Committee– to help develop these critical resources for helping to implement change.
The NPA expects other partner institutions to potentially seize on the opportunity to provide additional resources needed for success.

Additionally, the NPA successfully demonstrated through its pilot recognition project that institutions are willing to share their paths forward and best practices with other members of the postdoctoral community.

The NPA intends to capture and share those resources as a hub to complement the work that already exists in its Resource Library.

It’s also understood that institutions may prioritize some particular RPPPs in the short, near, long term and NPA does not expect institutions to target all of them at once.

9. What is the NPA asking institutions to do regarding the 10% professional development protected time?

- The NPA is recommending its institutions “provide protected time for professional development in the formally stated position or role of the postdoc.”
- By stating in the postdoc position description that professional development is to be provided at a rate of at least 10 percent of the postdoc’s time, the institution is clearly signaling that the postdoc is a position that differs from that of a staff scientist, in addition to its period of mentored training.
- Many individual career development award funding mechanisms have this built into the funded training, and can be used as a model.
- The NIH ACD working group mentioned above also recommended that the professional development time of postdocs be established at 10 percent, helping quantify a long-held differentiation of the postdoc as a person in a period of mentored training.
- The 10 percent is not meant to be additional time spent by the postdoc, but 10 percent of the existing time spent by the postdocs in their jobs rededicated to the accomplishment of professional development, with a definition of such development to be determined by the institution.

10. What if my state does not allow DEI programs?

- The Foreword to the RPPP clearly states: “Adoption of any recommendation is not expected where superseded by state law.”
- There is no expectation that institutions will promote DEIB policies or any other actions that run contrary to state law.

11. Our institution has a postdoc office staffed by only a single person. How do we accomplish everything that is recommended?

- The NPA understands that these recommendations are extensive in their reach. Our hope is institutions will pick areas where they can make progress step-by-step, understanding it could take many years to accomplish bigger goals.
- Depending on the hierarchy of each institution, different recommendations will be easier to accomplish at any given time.
The NPA applauds any amount of forward progress toward achieving these recommendations.