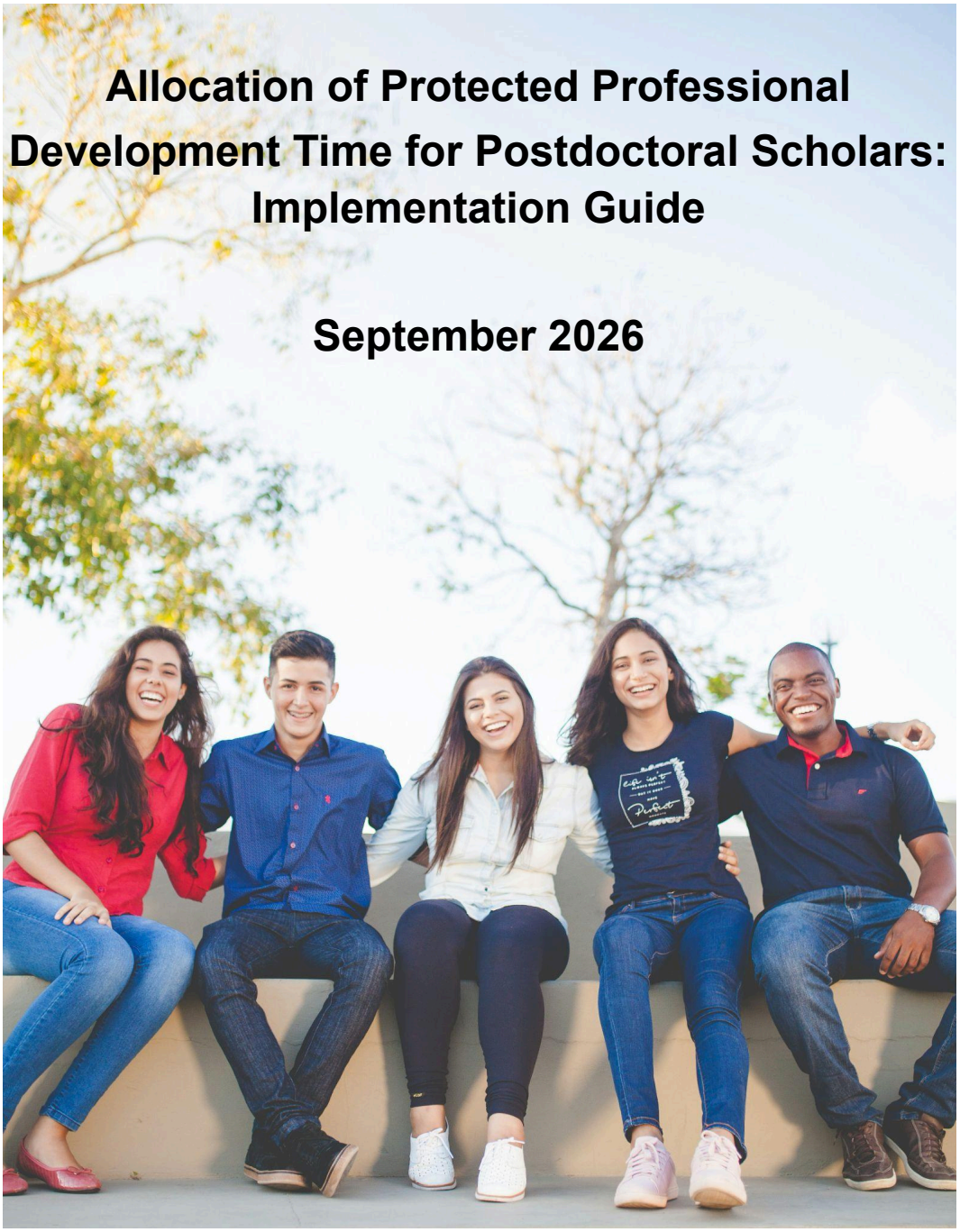
NATIONAL POSTDOCTORAL ASSOCIATION

Allocation of Protected Professional Development Time for Postdoctoral Scholars: Implementation Guide

September 2026



National Postdoctoral Association

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Introduction

The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) released its Recommended Postdoctoral Policies and Practices (RPPP) in 2024. The RPPP contains a set of core recommendations to support the treatment, mentorship, and training of postdoctoral scholars. **RPPP recommendation *A1b*** states:

"Provide protected time for professional development in the formally stated position or role of the postdoc. Postdoctoral scholars should receive a set percentage of protected time to pursue professional development activities outside of regular research responsibilities, including but not limited to self-directed research, mentoring (as a mentor and/or mentee), teaching, professional networking, conference attendance, and career skills development. This percentage should be set at a minimum of ten percent (10%) of postdoctoral scholars' time."

The purpose of this guide is to **help postdoc office leaders advocate for and implement RPPP recommendation A1b at their institutions**.

How to use this Guide

- Step 1: Assess your institution on its level of meeting recommendation A1b as Minimal, Good, Excellent, or Aspirational based on the Implementation Table.
- Step 2: Review the implementation resources.
- Step 3: Set a goal to progress to a higher level of implementation according to the Implementation Table. This can be improved within an implementation level in the short-term and work towards moving to the next level in the long-term.
- Step 4: Develop an action plan.

Step 1: Assess

The Implementation Table describes the responsibilities of the postdoctoral scholar, faculty mentor, and the institution on a spectrum from Minimal to Aspirational.

Table 1: Implementation Table

Role	Minimal	Good	Excellent	Aspirational
Postdoctoral Scholar	Awareness of Professional Development Opportunities	Expected to develop and update IDPs/ action plan	Required to develop and update IDPs/ action plan	Required to submit IDP/ action plan and progression for review, assessment, and approval
Faculty Mentor	Awareness of Professional Development Opportunities	Expected to hold career conversations	Required to hold career conversations	Required to hold career conversations.
Institution	Develop Professional Development Opportunities Provide awareness of Professional Development Opportunities	Everything listed under Minimal Provide support and training to postdocs to develop IDPs Provide support and training to postdocs and faculty to have effective career conversations Set the expectation for allocated prof dev time in writing (e.g. policy, IDP instructions, appointment)	Everything listed under Fair Provide oversight - requires a dedicated FTE to manage a process to document compliance and monitor non-compliance	Everything listed under Good Provide oversight - requires a dedicated FTE to manage a process for review, giving feedback, assessment, and approval, and monitor non-compliance

Reflect on your institution and circle the responsibilities and level of accountability of postdocs, faculty mentors, and the institution. What is your assessment of your institution on the implementation spectrum? Check what fits best.

Assessment **Notes**

- □ Low Minimal
- □ Minimal
- □ Low Good
- □ Good
- □ Low Excellent
- □ Excellent
- □ Low Aspirational
- □ Aspirational

NPA Resource Library

Step 2: Review the Implementation Resources

Implementation Tips

- Identify and engage all stakeholders, which may include Human Resources, Office of Research, Faculty Affairs, Graduate School, Department Chairs, Career Development Center, the Postdoctoral Association, and Union.
- Use and adapt information from this guide to support a proposal for change and higher accountability to your leadership.
- Recognize and convey to relevant individuals that the professional development opportunities in the NPA recommendation extend beyond those available and achievable through a postdoc's core research. Examples include conducting career networking, developing leadership skills, or attending a peer-mentoring session.
- Develop a central way to share professional development opportunities to postdoctoral scholars, faculty mentors, and program directors.
- The use of a written expectation-setting document between a postdoc and their faculty mentor can be beneficial to ensure alignment between both parties. Ideally, this happens early in a postdoc position and allows for a new postdoc to articulate their expectations, training needs, and career goals, while allowing the faculty mentor to state their work style, communication processes, and expectations for the postdoc's work in their group. The use of the AAMC's Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and Their Mentors could be beneficial in facilitating these conversations. Emphasizing the following three points from the Compact helps drive home key points regarding the postdoc's career & professional development:
    1. The postdoc acknowledges that they have the primary responsibility for the development of their career.
    2. The faculty mentor will provide a supportive training environment to facilitate the postdoctoral appointee's personal and professional growth.
    3. The faculty mentor will provide the postdoc with guidance and mentoring and will seek the assistance of other faculty and departmental/institutional resources when necessary.
- Design workshops and provide planning documents (individual development plan, or IDP, templates) to help maximize postdoctoral professional development time for new postdoctoral scholars.
- Include institutional policies and guidance for protected professional development time of at least 10% in new faculty training, faculty mentor training, and postdoc hiring guides.
- Establish Faculty Champions - faculty who will promote awareness about postdoc professional development opportunities.

Implementation Examples

Institutions have different policies, guidance, and processes to support providing protected professional development time. Here are examples within the spectrum of implementation.

Washington University in St. Louis

The allocation of protected professional development time is described in the Postdoctoral Education Policy: https://postdoc.wustl.edu/professional-development/.
Policy text (under Section III: Appointments, Compensation, and Benefits)
"The University recommends that all faculty mentors ensure that postdoctoral appointees are allowed at least 10% of their effort to participate in career and professional development activities throughout their postdoctoral appointment. Each faculty mentor should include this commitment in the appointment letter."

Policy Approval Process in 2023

- The Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs revised the original policy to update terminology, clarify, and expand the policy terms.
- The Dean of each school provided input on policy changes.
- The updated policy was approved by the Provost.

Involved University Sectors/Offices

- Office of Postdoctoral Affairs
- Vice Chancellor for Research
- Office of Postdoctoral Affairs Faculty Advisory Committee
- Individual School Deans

Vanderbilt University

Vanderbilt University postdocs are expected to develop goals around research, career advancement, and skill development, which are required to complete and submit an IDP annually - within the first 3 months as a new postdoc and then annually to qualify for reappointment. This IDP should reflect on accomplishments from the past year, goal setting for the coming year, and long-term career goals. Faculty mentors must indicate how they will support the postdoc's goals. All IDP paperwork and sign-offs are handled through REDCap software that allows routing and review. The career development portion of the IDP is reviewed by the dean of each school or college and the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs. Recommended career and professional development opportunities are offered through the Graduate and Postdoc Career Success (GPCS) program or the Biomedical Research Education and Training office, if applicable. As of August 2026, Vanderbilt does not mandate a specific percentage of protected time for professional development in its postdoc policies, although senior staff has noted this is an area to explore and clarify going forward.
https://www.vanderbilt.edu/postdoc/current-postdocs/resources/#h2-individual-development-plan-idp

Oregon State University

Oregon State University provides the guideline "15% of the Postdoctoral Scholar or Fellow's time should be devoted to professional development activities that develop core competencies outside of regular research responsibilities" on their IDP template. New postdocs are required to complete their IDP within the first 3 months, and an Annual Report that summarizes their progress on goals and updates their IDP for the following year. Faculty mentors attend mentor training that guides them through IDP use and career conversations. On the IDP and Annual report, faculty mentors must write in how they will support their scholar's goals. Templates are downloaded from the website and are

managed through email. Documents are reviewed and approved by the Associate Dean. If the IDP goals or faculty comments do not appear to support the commitment to 15% professional development time, the Associate Dean will return the documents for revision. Continued employment at reappointment requires the Associate Dean's approval to HR. https://gradschool.oregonstate.edu/postdocs/individual-development-plan;

Materials to Support Your Advocacy

What do the Government, Funders, and Professional Societies Say?

Code of Federal Regulations

100% research effort of a postdoc on grants includes effort towards training and career development activities. The dual nature of a postdoctoral scholar as researcher and trainee is acknowledged within the Code of Federal Regulations Title 2 - Grants and Agreements, Subtitle A Subpart E Cost Principles § 200.400f on page 147 of the Subtitle A section and here. "For recipients and subrecipients that educate and engage students in research, the dual role of students as both trainees and employees (including pre- and post-doctoral staff) contributing to the completion of Federal awards for research must be recognized in the application of these principles." Also see article from 2014: https://www.science.org/content/article/yes-you-can-attend-career-event-says-us-government

National Institutes of Health

The NIH issued a 2014 notice referring to the clarification from the Office of Management and Budget regarding the Code of Federal Regulations. "Staff in postdoctoral positions engaged in research, while not generally pursuing an additional degree, are expected to be actively engaged in their training and career development under their research appointments as Post-Docs." Dr. Kim Petrie, Assistant Dean of Biomedical Career Development at Vanderbilt University, provides the resources and links that clarify this.

In 2024, an NIH ACD Working Group recommended that institutions: (1) ensure that postdoctoral scholars receive career and professional development opportunities as an integrated, measured component of the postdoctoral experience that occupies a minimum average of 10% of a postdoctoral scholar's effort, (2) create policies and resources to ensure equitable access to this training.

National Science Foundation

NSF Research Postdoctoral Fellowship guidelines include that Individual Development Plans are required and must include "the professional development goals, research and career preparation activities, and timeline for achieving them. The professional development activities might, for example, include formal coursework, workshops, and scholarly community activities such as conference presentations or colloquia participation. Teaching activity (no more than one course per year) should be incorporated into the individual development plan if such teaching

experience is deemed valuable for the Fellow's career development. The individual development plan should also include a timetable with annual goals along with benchmarks for major anticipated outcomes. Finally, the plan should include a description of the Fellow's career goals and explanation of how the activities proposed would contribute to career development and future research directions."

Select responses to NIH's Request for Information on Re-envisioning U.S. Postdoctoral Research Training and Career Progression within the Biomedical Research Enterprise (NOT-OD-23-084).

American Association of Medical Schools

"Regardless of funding sources, institutions and mentors should provide scientific guidance and access to professional development opportunities in order to support career development." AAMC Response

Graduate Career Consortium

"Career and professional development (CPD) opportunities are a significant selling point for institutions and mutually reinforce the research endeavors of postdoctoral scholars. Specifically, they enable skill building for professional success and exposure to diverse careers. First, we recommend establishing a minimum percentage of postdoc time (e.g., 15% of effort) to be devoted to CPD activities, and providing tools to assist institutions to adhere to these requirements and incentivize compliance beyond Individual Development Plans (e.g., require ongoing CPD, in order for postdoctoral scholars to be eligible to be paid by an NIH grant). GCC Response

What counts as professional development?

Philosophy to think about what counts and what does not

The postdoc should define professional development activities and be informed by their unique needs and career goals. Ideally, these career goals are expressed in an Individual Development Plan (IDP) that the postdoc creates and discusses with their faculty mentor early in their appointment (or even before they begin the position) to discuss their goals and expectations for the position as well as the expectations of the faculty mentor. The myIDP framework from Science Careers outlines three types of goals a postdoc or graduate student should consider in their IDP:

1) Career advancement goals, which help one move forward in their career
2) Skills development goals, which aim to improve skill and knowledge areas in which one may be deficient
3) Project completion goals, which help one stay on top of the various projects and deliverables they are working on

Professional development activities would be most related to career advancement goals and potentially skills development goals if the skills being developed align with one's long-term career goals. For example, learning computer programming, data science, and data visualization skills may be highly relevant professional development activities for a postdoc planning to pursue a career as a data

scientist. For postdocs who are still refining their career goals, career exploration activities (e.g., skills & interests assessments, informational interviews) should be considered professional development.

Postdocs with a goal of pursuing a research-intensive faculty career may find workshops and experiences focused on developing teaching and grant writing skills to be critical to their professional development. Similarly, these postdocs may benefit from being involved in research grant writing along with their faculty mentor. Importantly, however, activities like assisting with grant writing should only be considered professional development if they align with the postdoc's career goals. In some cases, a postdoc may be providing support for writing a research grant as part of their work duties, not necessarily because this work aligns with their self-directed career and professional development. We bring up this specific example as we believe it highlights the nuance of what should "count" as professional development. Grant writing support *could* count as professional development, but only if it aligns with the postdoc's *explicit* career goals. Just because work such as this *could* align with a career goal does not mean it will for all postdocs. This situation speaks to the need for career goals to be clearly outlined between the postdoc and their faculty mentor such that activities that advance their pursuit of these goals can be classified as professional development, while others may be more actively classified as part of their job duties and responsibilities, in which case other activities should then be articulated that align with the postdoc's career and professional development.

We acknowledge the line between skills development, professional development and activities related to one's job duties as a postdoc and ultimate career goals is blurry. We encourage postdocs to reflect often on their long-term career goals, revisit their IDP, and keep lines of communication with their faculty mentor(s) open to ensure career advancement goals and activities related to their career and professional development remain a key area of focus during their time as a postdoc.

Here are examples of how training goals for postdoctoral scholars with different career goals vary, as well as the professional development activities that support them. It can be helpful to see what 10% time (average of 4 hours per week) can look like over a long time period. These examples can be used and modified for your communications and advocacy efforts.

Training Plan Examples

Biomedical Faculty Track Example

Background: Sam is a biomedical postdoctoral scholar interested in becoming a research tenure-track faculty member. He has been working in his PI's lab for ~2 years and is ready to start thinking about how he will build an independent research program. He has some experience writing sections of a grant proposal, but has never developed his own from ideation. Sam has several co-authored manuscripts and is skilled in writing; however, he has not been fully involved in all steps of the article submission and peer review processes. For professional development this year, he intends to develop his grant-writing skills and research independence by preparing an NIH K99/R00 career transition award application and submitting a manuscript - leading the development and submission from beginning to end.

Training Goal and Effort	**Professional Development Activities Examples**
Lead manuscript publication submission Time: 3 months; 48 hours; ~3.7 hours/week Jan - Mar	Identify journal options and write pre-submission inquiries to editors (20 hours) Write cover letter (2 hours) Lead manuscript submission and journal communication process (6 hours) Respond to reviewer comments (20 hours)
Develop grant proposal development skills through preparing a NIH K99/R00 application Time: 6 months; 134 hours; ~5 hours/week April - Sep	Attend/watch a panel featuring K99/R00-awardees and review available examples (4 hours) Attend trainings or consultations from your sponsored grant programs office (6 hours) Research Proposal ● Protected time to develop project ideas, research niche, collaborations, and draft (2 hours per week for 6 months; 52 hours) ● Reach out to faculty and staff for feedback on proposal components and revise (20 hours) Budget ● Review examples and resources and draft a budget (20 hours) ● Reach out to faculty and finance staff for feedback on budget and revise (4 hours) Develop Mentoring and Career Development Plans (20 hours) Compile and submit NIH K99/R00 application (8 hours)
Develop mentorship skills Time: 12 months; 26 hours; 0.5 hours/week Throughout the year	Participate in all-day CIMER mentor training workshop (6 hours) Practice mentoring skills in all interactions with junior scientists (20 hours)

In this example, the postdoc has professional development activities that add up to 208 hours; approximately 4 hours/week or 10%.

Here are two additional examples that could be built out further by estimating the time for professional development activities.

Undetermined Career Goal Example

Background: Li is a third-year biomedical postdoc who initially planned to pursue a research faculty career but is now unsure of her career goals. She has made good progress in her research project with a manuscript in revision. She enjoys research project design and writing and is aware that there are other career paths in academia and industry that she will enjoy doing. For professional development this year, she intends to spend time exploring her career options and building her leadership and networking skills. As an international trainee, she is also navigating immigration planning and decisions that will impact her career opportunities.

Training Goal	**Professional Development**
Explore career options	Complete myIDP and Imagine PhD inventories Meet with Career Development Center 1-1 coaching Research top career options based on skills/interests/values, as well as immigration planning Attend Science Careers Conference or Job Fair Participate in a career exploration mentoring group Work on a project related to top career option through an internship or other volunteering
Build networking and leadership skills	Volunteer with the discipline's professional society Attend the National Postdoctoral Association Annual Conference and the PDA Leadership Bootcamp Attend local networking events and meet at least 2 people at each Hold at least 2 informational interviews in a chosen career path

Social Sciences Postdoc Considering a Dual-Track Job Search Track Example

Background: Emmanuel is a sociology postdoctoral scholar and is now in a 2-year training position focused on teaching, which he is passionate about. He is interested in two career paths that value teaching - one is a traditional faculty role, and the other is an educational development professional to help faculty create curriculum and teach well. He recognizes that to be a viable faculty candidate in his particular field, he needs to publish his PhD dissertation as a book, which he has never done before. Through engagement with his institution's Center for Teaching and Learning, he has learned about the educational development pathway, but he wishes to explore his options and opportunities further. His training goals support his development in his current teaching role and in preparing for his next steps.

Training Goal	**Professional Development**
Publish dissertation as a book	Use National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity (NCFDD) resources and books such as "The Book Proposal" to frame writing deadlines and timelines Create schedule for writing and deadlines Discuss book proposal with academic press editors Talk to academic presses at conferences Understand and follow submission guidelines
Explore educational development professional career path	Conduct targeted informational interviews to network and learn about career options Analyze job postings to understand roles, responsibilities, and requirements Develop additional skills to fill gaps Learn about the professional societies for educational developers - such as the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network.
Develop pedagogical skills and experience	Participate in Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning (CIRTL) programming Publish a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning article Refine a Teaching Philosophy

Step 3: Set a Goal

Every institution has different structures, resources, and priorities to consider that will impact how feasible change is. You may decide to focus on progressing within a level on the Implementation Table, for example, if an institution is assessed as being in the low Good level, a goal may be to move up within the Good grouping by improving and expanding professional development opportunities and awareness of resources. Or an institution may decide to aim for moving from Excellent to Aspirational by reviewing and providing feedback on IDPs.

From the Implementation Table, what is your

Current Assessment _____

Short-term Goal _____

Long-term Goal _____

Why have you selected these goals?

What are the challenges that you foresee?

Notes:

Step 4: Make an Action Plan

Now that you have set a goal, plan how you will reach it. What are activities/actions that you plan to take? For example, an institution may decide to move a guideline into an official policy, improve communication about professional development, expand initiatives supporting postdoc IDP use, or develop processes to manage IDP or reappointment approvals.

Table 2: Action Plan Table

Activity/Action	Steps	Resources	Collaborators and Support
e.g. move a guideline into an official policy	Break down your activity into 2-3 sub-activities or tasks	What resources will help you, from this guide or elsewhere	Who will work with you and/or support and advocate with you

Working Group

Developed by a sub-committee of the National Postdoctoral Association's Resource Development Committee.

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Special thanks to Dr. Victoria Hallinan and SPHERE for their contributions to the social science training goals example.

An early version of this work was presented as a workshop at the National Postdoctoral Association Annual Conference, March 2025, Boston, MA.

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