Finding your next steps through conflict, grievance, and mediation processes

This brief guide is intended as a roadmap to help postdoc offices, administrators, and faculty members navigate some of the interpersonal and intellectual challenges that they may encounter in their roles. Because each institution that hosts postdocs has different policies, personnel, and criteria for conflict, the questions and definitions below will help to clarify the types of possible action or remediation steps.

If you have further questions or need additional external support, please contact the NPA's Advocacy Committee at Advocacy@nationalpostdoc.org

What does the *Recommended Postdoctoral Policies and Practices* say?

The Recommended Postdoctoral Policies and Practices is NPA's manual for institutions to foster environments where postdocs can thrive. It identifies that institutions with postdocs should:

Provide an ombudsperson to assist with conflicts

Identify and establish policies to address performance issues

Identify and establish clear policies to address potential misconduct, harassment, and grievance issues affecting postdocs

For more details, please see the RPPP section B7, paragraphs a-c.

What terms should you know before moving forward?

Standardized Terms

These terms are fairly standardized across institutions. When in doubt, ask!

- Consultation (to discuss the issue without taking any action) vs. Mediation
- Conflict Resolution Service
- Discrimination
- Equal Opportunity & Compliance
- Grievance
- Harassment
- Ombudsperson
- Title IX

Institution-Specific Terms

These terms will vary based on the institution

- Authorship
- Concerns/ Concerning Behavior
- "Fair treatment and fair process"
- Inequitable Treatment & Behaviors
- Infringement of Autonomy
- Loss of Personal Civility
- Performance Improvement Plan
- Professional & Career Development Issues
- Retaliation
- Sexual Misconduct



Which office(s) might your institution have to help you navigate the conflict, mediation, and grievance process?

- Conflict Resolution Service
- Office of Equal Opportunity and Compliance
- Office of Equity and Access
- Ombuds Office

Note: Ombuds Offices are designed to be impartial, independent, and confidential, contacting them does not formally trigger university processes or notify a respondent of a grievance, acting as a safe, informal space to explore issues without formal repercussions, though the ombuds can help you navigate formal options if you choose to pursue them.



Questions to ask when navigating next steps:

- Does your institution have a postdoc office? Does it have a union?
- Does your institution have a policy against discrimination, harassment, and sexual misconduct?
- Are there separate policies for postdocs (and is it different depending on the source of funding) and staff?
- Are there separate policies for health science / med school employees (patient-facing) vs. regular “main campus” employees?
- Does your institution have a grievance policy (especially as they relate to research-related challenges)?
- Who is available at your institution to support your challenge (ie. ombudsmen)?
- Are postdocs at your institution employed through HR?
- Are there resources outside your institution that could offer you support (ie. Ethics Point)
- How visible are your policies. Are they easy to find, or buried deep in a handbook or policy document. Often awareness is the biggest obstacle to using services!
- What level of involvement does your institution’s Office of Postdoctoral Affairs have in the hiring and/or performance evaluation process?

Additional resources from NPA and its member institutions:

NPA SmartSkills Webinar: Conflict Resolution

Title IX and Sex Discrimination for the US Department of Education

Resources from UPenn:

Grievance Process for Postdocs

Overview of Resources to Support Conflict Management and Resolution

AAMC's Appropriate Treatment of Research Trainees

Yale's 1-pager from the Office of Postdoc Affairs