Project Summary

National Postdoctoral Association
Pre-Conference Session to Promote IMPACT Fellowship Success

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Introduction

National conditions among postdocs across various institutions vary greatly, with many individuals from underrepresented backgrounds lacking access to resources available to others. At some under-resourced institutions, there is not only a lack of support and programming for postdocs, there is no office assigned to handle postdoc affairs or the structured career and professional support for postdocs is limited. Even at higher-resourced institutions, training environments and research labs can be isolating for individuals from marginalized backgrounds. To address these issues head-on, the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) launched the IMPACT Fellowship Program in 2021 as a cohort-based professional development opportunity with community and relationship building at its core. It provides postdoctoral participants from underrepresented communities with access to personal and career resources via cohorts of peers and mentors helping Fellows strategically build upon existing skills, recognize opportunities, and advance in their careers. The NPA IMPACT Fellowship Program curriculum emphasizes relational learning and self-efficacy, is designed nimbly to maximize Fellows’ sense of belonging and connection to a broader community and provide education and career pathways to postdoctoral scholars to help broaden participation in STEM and related research. The program benefits society broadly by helping create a successful, empowered first class of IMPACT Fellows from disadvantaged backgrounds, increasing their chance of achieving societal leadership positions.

On March 31, 2022, as a pre-conference to the NPA Annual Conference in Chicago, the NPA held a session to promote success of the IMPACT Fellowship Program, gather evaluative information, provide a forum for engagement, and provide education and discovery in the area of understanding one’s values and applying them to one’s career. The event was made possible by the generous support of the National Science Foundation (NSF). The project was intended to empower IMPACT Program Fellows, as well as selected NSF Postdoctoral Research Fellowships in Biology (PRFB) Fellows, through an enriching final session of the program. Fellows met one another as well as their mentors and NSF PRFB program managers in person for the first time and engaged in activities that promote and extend the duration of the learning objectives of the full fellowship. Empowered by extensive advanced preparation, the day-long session focused on exploring the critical area of personal values and their relation to Fellows’ scientific research and career choices centered...
on a pair of workshops run by experts in inclusion and value identification for scientific advancement. The NPA facilitated the session by using a four-component strategy to achieve this result: 1) peer discussion and learning; 2) speaker-led workshops; 3) live course evaluation; and 4) networking opportunities. Fellows were also able to explore the educational opportunities at the full NPA Annual Conference, occurring during the two days directly following this session. This IMPACT session provided tools to Fellows to use the knowledge and resources they gained during the course of the full fellowship to implement activities or initiatives at their institutions and to contribute back to their communities, further scaling the overall impact. The session was evaluated using established effectiveness tools and criteria to inform program improvements for the next IMPACT course.

Attending the session were representatives from the NPA, the NSF, all six IMPACT Fellows, four PRFB Fellows, and two external speakers. To encourage greater participation in the session, anonymity during the session was promised, although the participants were informed by staff that comments and results may be shared in this report in aggregate or by anonymized individual comments.

**Session Events**

**Introductory Remarks**

*Stephanie Eberle, M.Ed.*  
*Executive Director, BioSci Careers, Stanford University*

Following introductions of attendees, NPA Board Chair Stephanie Eberle, M.Ed., spoke about the critical importance of belonging across multiple spaces, with a specific focus on the creation of IMPACT as a space built on belonging. They also emphasized the need to understand what belonging looks like to each individual and the importance of applying that recognition of belonging into one’s values and definition of success. Their remarks were focused on the audience of fellows from underrepresented communities who had emphasized, at least for the IMPACT Fellows, the need for a greater understanding and recognition of belonging in order to thrive in the postdoctoral space and beyond.

**Workshop One: Values and Introspection**

*Dr. Helen Hsu, Psy.D.*  
*Outreach Services Director, Counseling And Psychological Services, Stanford University*

The first of two workshops focused on the wellness that comes with knowing one’s values, rooting one’s mission in those values, and then implementing them in action. The intent of the workshop was for IMPACT Fellows and PRFB Fellows to identify and more closely align their values to their postdoc positions. Dr. Hsu is well-known for her work in these areas, and is president-elect of the American Psychological Association Div. 45 (Society for the Study of Race, Culture and Ethnicity), a past president of the Asian American Psychological Association (AAPA), and past Chair of the Training Advisory Committee at the American Psychological Association (APA).

The workshop hit on multiple themes regarding areas missing in today’s postdoctoral experience that could be accentuated if fellows do not have the same access to resources as their peers. These included the concept that today’s leadership programs and professional development opportunities, when provided to postdocs, are often missing appropriate discussion and integration of values. Adding to this is that there is a lack of “radical candor” and “tactical empathy” within such programming. Session participants universally confirmed that this is indeed the case: they have not had space to speak about values within their postdoctoral programs. Dr. Hsu emphasized, however, that it is essential for
discussing values transparently in order to align them with work goals, leading to greater success in both professional and personal lives. At times, Dr. Hsu, acknowledged, without proper attention to individual values, we may face a collision between them and our actions at work. Session participants weighed in on this line of argument with agreement and spoke to whether their host institutions provided space for exploration, communication and discussion of values and alignment with postdoctoral work. [Participant comments bulleted in italics throughout]

- I have used tools to understand core values, and try to use them personally, but they are never discussed at work in my postdoc position.
- I may have some understanding of my values, but the question becomes do I have the energy or courage to act, to push back on a system that doesn’t seem to recognize the importance of values.
- My host institution does not support my values, pushing me to find external networks for support.
- Unless a host institution sets boundaries between work and life, the postdoc position provides little to no protection for acting on one’s values and thriving in areas outside of work, finding satisfaction as an individual.
- If you don’t select a host institution for your postdoc that aligns with your values, you will spend too much of your time fighting the system. It’s possible to find that place, or create that space within your institution but be prepared for pushback and a major time commitment.
- It can be difficult to understand the values of a potential host institution when looking at postdoc positions. For instance, my institution has so few Black researchers: is it interested in hiring me to become a great scientist or to fill a quota?
- The level of support for appreciating and giving space to discussing their values drops from undergraduate to graduate to postdoctoral periods. In my undergraduate life, I was provided much support to make sure there was a sense of alignment and belonging. I stayed at the same institution from undergraduate to graduate to postdoc, and today, there is no support or space for discussing my values. Instead, I am told not to complain or make waves, to be happy with meager pay and benefits as if my chance to work is a gift from the university.
● We are fighting a generational gap in science. My research statement has to reflect my values; but the values of this generation may be different from the older generation now in power at most academic institutions.

● There is a temptation for postdocs to embrace martyrdom as they try to balance their personal values with the lack of resources and support at their institutions. This shouldn’t be the case and can have a substantial, negative impact and legacy on the postdoc position.

It is important to the success of implementing the alignment of values and action, and gaining the assertiveness needed to push against a system that may not provide proactively space for such alignment is having an advocate. Participants commented on this as well.

● Postdoc offices (PDOs) need to provide tools and resources to help postdocs break down existing barriers and walls, provide support to the individual postdocs in inserting their values into their work, and allowing postdocs to flourish.

● Postdoc associations (PDAs) at specific institutions can also be advocates for those individuals looking to act upon their values, but need to have this issue discussed among the PDA leadership and set as a priority.

● Principal investigators (PIs), who typically oversee us as postdocs, aren’t always able to act on our behalf and allow us space to align values with our work. They are wearing many hats and often overwhelmed, overworked, and oriented around tactical not strategic success.

● Unions do not exist at every institution. At mine, they do, and helps push back against the status quo that does not pay attention to the values and professional growth of postdocs, much less provide focus on needs of postdocs from underrepresented backgrounds.

● How closely should we tie ourselves to role models and mentors when thinking about our core values and what we want to be and do?

Values may also change over time, explained Dr. Hsu, especially as life changes occur throughout one’s career. Dr. Hsu inquired whether values have changed for the Fellows.

● Yes. Mine has changed from oriented around myself as an individual to a community as I have become part of a larger culture. This coincided with my moving from a local community of people from minority backgrounds that was largely ignored by the existing academic system to joining that system as a graduate student and postdoc.

● Yes. Although we have similar values across cultures around the world, there is a dominant culture in America that emphasizes success and prosperity of the individual.

● Graduate school increased my assertiveness because I felt I was at the bottom of the “totem pole” as the only Black person in my department. In that situation, who fights for you? You must define your values and be true to them not only for yourself but those you impact.

● Most of us, especially as postdocs, face economic anxiety. That anxiety alone can affect values especially in the short term.

In thinking about your identities as individuals from underrepresented communities, the need to stay aligned to your values may be stronger than for those who are part of a majority, established system. It is an ongoing challenge for research institutions to change, to increase their own awareness and openness toward those of varied backgrounds.
● Some universities are trying to become more diverse in their postdoc population and have developed tools to do so. I hope there is a place for values in these efforts as well. But there needs to be a balance between values and context. For instance, a DEI [diversity, equity and inclusion] scoring mechanism used by a university may not apply equally for domestic minority postdocs and foreign postdocs. The weightings and construct of these tools can be difficult to balance correctly.

● There’s a significant difference between First Nation values and western values. First Nation emphasizes the critical value of the continuation of the community and the success of others. The western value system is oriented around the individual. For a postdoc working within an institution, these can be difficult to justify.

● Hiring committees for postdocs are not well trained on how to judge DEI statements from applicants. The process can easily become an exercise in “trauma dumping” into the DEI statement on applications. This becomes impossible to judge. Maybe institutions seeking postdocs need to use more qualitative terms rather than trying to turn applications and applicants into numbers.

Dr. Hsu concluded the workshop by encouraging postdoc participants to continue to think about how they can achieve greater success and satisfaction as postdocs by building greater understanding of values and connectivity to our work. For postdocs, it is essential to have the confidence to be assertive and to advocate for oneself, especially if no one else will, or there will be no space to discuss values and their importance.

One tool Dr. Hsu emphasized in this area is the development of a personal mission statement that includes: what you want to be today, core values, mentors and role models, and what you want to accomplish in the future. In addition, postdocs should come back to their values over and over again, revisiting them to see if they have changed and to ensure that their work and personal life is aligned with these values. Such revisitation will enable far greater visibility into the paths toward, and likelihood of, success as a postdoc and beyond. This is especially true for those who are coming from outside of the traditional system of academia and who will need to build their own trusted advisory network.

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**Workshop Two: The Application of Values**

Diana Mendez, M.A., M.S. Candidate
Associate Director, NYU Breakthrough Leadership Scholars, Office for Diversity and Inclusion, NYU Stern School of Business

Following the work on identification and validation of values in the first workshop, the second workshop focused on the application of such values in the career trajectory to help ensure that the ethics and values of potential future workplace institutions are in alignment with one’s own. This more practical discussion allowed participants to take what they had gleaned from the initial workshop and consider values in the context of tactical career development.

Ms. Mendez called attention to the wide category of values that are important to consider before making career choices, including intrinsic values (intangible rewards including the ability to use creativity), extrinsic values (tangible rewards including pay, promotion),
and lifestyle values (a by-product of intrinsic and extrinsic values including living in a preferred location or frequency of travel).

During a workplace values activity, participants were able to examine the values associated with both their work environment values and specific work activities to call attention to how individual postdocs are spending their time and whether or not that time is spent in alignment with their values. Such self-reflection is important for ensuring that in future positions, successful value/action alignment can be replicated while incongruencies can be avoided. Particularly, participants were asked what three “non-negotiables” (related to values) should be included in long-term career goals. This was augmented by examining the same career decisions from the perspective of completion, by imagining oneself toward the end of one’s life, and reflecting on theoretical career achievements, work location, and communities aided through one’s work. Participants commented on this self-examination.

- The values in our work that we want to obtain are ones that we’re lacking today as postdocs.
- Finding values in a job is a privilege. Not everyone has the option to choose values when faced with providing for a family, for instance.
- Looking back on what we want out of our jobs from a future state creates some urgency to our decisions now. It makes me realize that I have to take steps now to achieve what I want to achieve in the future.

The conversation transitioned to inclusivity among underrepresented cohorts, with a focus on identifying success or failures at a workplace in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts. In reflecting on employer actions that may mesh with personal values, it is worth considering DEI efforts, including those that are included in job descriptions and employer websites by viewing the DEI statement of the organizations. Potential employees can research employers on social media, not just for what they state, but whom they follow, to ensure alignment with values.

Ms. Mendez recommended paying particular attention to language used that may separate a valid employer effort from posturing. Inclusive language in a job posting, for instance, may use “they” instead of “he/she” or “chairperson” instead of “chairman.” On the other hand, words like “aggressive” and “independent” are often used as code words to suggest a preference for male candidates, while “supportive” and “empathetic” refer to females. Also to note are references like “able-bodied,” “healthy,” or “up and coming” (preference for younger candidates) or “proper English” (American-born). Inclusive companies may include benefits like paid parental leave, sex re-assignment surgery coverage, domestic partner coverage, and childcare facilities.

Beyond DEI, the interview is an opportunity to ensure that one’s own values align with those of an employer. Postdocs are encouraged to see the interview process as a chance to interview an employer as much as being interviewed by one. Postdocs can also inquire about DEI initiatives during interviews by not holding back and instead asking difficult questions. Questions to pose could include:

- “When was the last time you mentored a person different from yourself?”
- “How would you describe the work culture?”
- “How do you support your employees in moving up within the organization?”
- “Do you offer employee resource groups [ERGs] to your employees?”
- “Do you have an open channel to leadership for concerns”

Another helpful tool for postdocs that helps ensure values are not being lost during the early days of employ-
ment is the “90-day reflection.” When approaching the 90-day mark at a new job, an employee should deliberately reflect on the following:

- Does your supervisor know about your goals, interests, skills and values?
- What activities are you being asked to do?
- What committees are you being asked to participate in?
- What support are you receiving to accomplish goals?

**Conclusion to IMPACT Program Coursework; Mentor Coffee**

**IMPACT Task Force Members**

The IMPACT Fellows concluded their “classroom” portion of their fellowship by sharing feedback with the NPA IMPACT Task Force members on the prior six months. The feedback will be incorporated into the second class of IMPACT Fellows for 2022-23. In addition, Fellows were recognized individually for their contributions during the course of the program and presented with certificates. Mentors from sponsoring universities then joined the discussion and engaged with the PRFB and IMPACT Fellows over coffee, providing them the chance to meet one another in person, before heading to dinner for further discussion and socializing. This part of the program was designed to allow the participants the flexibility to engage with one another as well as with mentors and NSF and NPA staff in an informal setting to network while expressing concerns and highlights of the program.