

REPORT OF THE POSTDOCTORAL RESEARCHERS WORKING GROUP

APRIL 27, 2010

Last fall, staff from the Division of Biology and Medicine (BioMed), the Graduate School, the Dean of the Faculty (DoF), Human Resources (HR) and the Provost's Office began meeting on an ad-hoc basis to address several mutual concerns about postdoctoral (postdoc) researchers, specifically about benefits and appointments. We found a number of ways in which we believe the University can better serve this important group and, as is often the case, identified additional issues that we believe should be addressed in the future.

Background:

In 2004, the Ad Hoc Committee on Postdoctoral Researchers was charged by the Provost to evaluate the training, development, and employment environment of postdoctoral researchers at Brown and to offer recommendations regarding the policies governing the employment and oversight of such researchers. After gathering appropriate internal and benchmarking information, the Committee developed four overall recommendations: (1) clarify and strengthen Brown's definitions of postdoctoral researchers; (2) equalize health and dental benefits for all postdoctoral researchers; and (3) establish a Postdoc Liaison in the Office of the Vice President for Research (OVPR). (4) It was also decided at this time not to recommend establishing salary minimums for postdoctoral researchers.

The 2004 report clarified appointment types and associated benefits, and important progress has been made in implementing several of the recommendations, although we should perhaps point out that direct support for postdocs turned out to be provided not by the OVPR, but rather by the Graduate School and the Division of Biology and Medicine. The BioMed Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (OGPS) was established in January 2006, and has worked with the Graduate School to make considerable progress on postdoc issues over the last five years, including:

- Development of an orientation packet for all new postdocs which includes, among other valuable information, Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) guidelines, Association of American Medical Colleges' "Compact Between Postdoctoral Appointees and Their Mentors" and the OGPS's postdoc brochure
- Implementation of individual orientation sessions for each new postdoc, during which the orientation packet is reviewed and discussed, and questions answered
- Establishment of an annual review policy for the evaluation of postdocs
- Creation of a database for tracking BioMed postdocs
- Granting interlibrary loan privileges and Backup Care Benefits to all postdocs
- Creation of the Postdoc Advisory Panel which represents postdocs campus-wide
- Creation of a Graduate Student and Postdoc Parent Resource website
- Organization of an Annual Postdoc Networking and Resource Fair
- Creation of a Postdoc listserv, Postdoc Google Groups, and Human Resources Postdoc webpage, as well as the ability to email postdocs with important messages

Current Issues:

In addition to OGPS and the Graduate School, several other offices provide support to postdocs: the Dean of the Faculty office handles appointments within its departments and Human Resources coordinates payroll and benefits. Representatives of these offices came together last fall and formed the Postdoc Working Group in order to continue the forward momentum that had been established and to address a number of particular questions that have arisen in the years since the 2004 report was issued. Core members of the group were Sheila Bonde, Dean of the Graduate School; Nancy Thompson, Associate Dean of Medicine for Graduate & Postdoctoral Training; Susan Rottenberg, Postdoctoral Program & Data Manager; Carolyn Dean, Senior Associate Dean of the Faculty; Elizabeth Doherty, Senior Associate Dean of the Faculty; Valerie Wilson, Associate Provost and Director of Institutional Diversity; and Karen Davis, Vice President for Human Resources. The group was convened by Nancy Dunbar, Associate Provost. Jabbar Bennett, Assistant Dean of the Graduate School for Recruiting and Professional Development, joined the working group this spring and other staff members contributed to individual discussions.

The specific issues identified this year included the following:

1. Clarification of postdoc benefits policies for paid time off, including vacation, sick leave and maternity/medical leave.
2. Coordination between the Dean of the Faculty office and the Graduate School in terms of appointments and support.
3. Development of postdoc tracking system for postdocs campus-wide.
4. Establishment of a web presence for all postdocs and a common entry point for those seeking information about postdoc policies, programs and benefits.
5. Examination of inequities between Postdoctoral Research Associates (PDRAs) and Postdoctoral Fellows (PDFs).
6. Review of teaching appointments.
7. Review of services to postdocs and resources for professional development.
8. Identification of the need to strengthen search procedures when hiring new postdocs.

Results and Recommendations:

1. *Clarification of postdoc benefits policies for paid time off including vacation, sick leave and maternity/medical leave.*

The status of postdocs at Brown has remained – perhaps inevitably – somewhat murky: those holding such appointments are neither students nor faculty nor staff. There has been a concomitant lack of clarity about the benefits to which they are entitled, and about the policies that apply to them. To take one example, postdocs are not entitled to the maternity leave benefits available for staff; because they are not teaching faculty, they are not entitled to paid parental teaching relief.

The Working Group drafted policies for time off, sick time, and maternity and medical leave which were subsequently reviewed and approved. These policies, described below, let

postdocs and their supervisors know what is warranted in each of these areas. It is worth noting that this will also make our policies competitive with those of our peers.

Vacation time¹

We recommend that postdoctoral fellows and postdoctoral research associates accrue 10 days of vacation per year. Vacation time is accrued at a rate of one day per month and is not accrued in December or June. When a postdoc leaves Brown, there is no payment for unused vacation time. Guidelines for the use of vacation time may be found in Human Resources Policy 30.021.

Sick time

Postdoctoral fellows and postdoctoral research associates accrue and use sick time (up to 12 days/year for full-time employees) according to the same policies that apply to all employees on the regular payroll. If circumstances are such that a longer absence is required for medical reasons, unpaid leave may be requested. See Human Resources Policy 30.022.

Maternity and Medical leave

A postdoctoral fellow or postdoctoral research associate is automatically eligible for six (6) weeks paid maternity leave. If salary support is from grants or contracts, the salary while on maternity leave continues to be paid from these sources, in proportion to effort and subject to the availability of funding.

Paid medical leave of up to six (6) weeks may be granted to postdocs, with the duration of such leave determined by the physician. Salary during the period of paid medical leave continues to be paid from the usual source of funding, in proportion to effort and subject to the availability of funding. In the event that a postdoc's circumstances require longer absences for illness or maternity, it may be possible to arrange for unpaid leave. Early consultation with Human Resources is advised in any such case.

Note that all University employees are covered by the Family Medical Leave Act and by relevant Rhode Island laws. Details regarding terms and eligibility may be obtained from the Human Resources Office.

2. Coordination between the Dean of the Faculty office and the Graduate School in terms of appointments.

Currently postdoctoral affairs are managed by several offices. Within the Division of Biology and Medicine, hiring, appointment, mentoring and evaluation are coordinated in the OGPS. For DoF departments, hiring and appointment are handled in the Dean of the Faculty office, while mentoring and evaluation are generally managed by the Graduate School. [For

¹ This and the other policies apply to full-time postdocs. For postdocs whose appointments are part-time, the policies will be modified consistent with other University policies regarding part-time employees.

all postdocs, EEO/AA oversight is provided by the Provost's office, while payroll and benefits are handled in Human Resources.]

The separation of appointment and mentoring for some postdocs is not ideal. Our group discussed locating all postdoc services in the Graduate School or the Dean of the Faculty office, mirroring the process established in BioMed. We did not, however, reach a conclusion on this issue. For the short term, we recommend tightly coordinating the processes, but not merging them. For the next year, appointments processed by the DoF will receive welcome packets and have an incoming orientation at the Graduate School. This process should be reexamined within a year or two.

3. Development of a postdoc tracking system.

The ability to track Postdoctoral Research Associates and Fellows accurately is essential for effective communication and support. Unfortunately, the University currently does not have an adequate system to handle this function. Postdocs are not tracked in Banner because they are not classified as students. Because appointments are managed in two different offices, there is no single authoritative database on appointments. The Human Resources Management System (HRMS) offers the best mechanism currently available but it has significant limitations. While it records current demographic information (e.g. name, gender, race/ethnicity, title and supervisor), it does not track data historically.

A proper tracking system for postdocs remains a goal. In the meantime – that is, until a HRMS revision or faculty database offers a solution – our group believes we must rely on business process solutions and communication between the DoF, Graduate School and OGPS. For example, HR could provide enhanced monthly reports on postdoc appointments to the DoF and OGPS; these two offices, in turn, would attempt to manage their parallel systems in a consistent manner and to share information regularly.

Our group wants to emphasize the importance of resolving the question of how data about postdocs across the university will be managed. Postdocs play a critical role in Brown's research mission and information that allows many offices to count them, communicate with them, and support them is essential. In addition to producing research, postdocs also take courses, teach, and need mentoring as well as supervision.

4. Creation of a web presence for all postdocs and a common entry point for those seeking information about postdoc policies, programs and benefits.

Because many offices interact with postdocs, information relevant to them is dispersed and sometimes difficult to find. There should be a "Postdoc" entry in the web A-Z list that leads one to a single page on which it is possible to find all information relevant to postdocs. We concluded that the best starting point would be a page on the Human Resources webpage. An initial version of this page was created in the fall of 2009 and includes links to postdoc information on other websites at Brown (OGPS, the Graduate School, DoF, etc.) as well as

several external sites. We believe it will be possible to enhance the content of this page during the summer of 2010.

5. *Examination of inequities between Postdoctoral Research Associates (PDRAs) and Postdoctoral Fellows (PDFs).*

Brown appoints two types of postdocs, Postdoctoral Research Associates and Postdoctoral Fellows. The primary difference between the two appointment types is that PDRAs are Brown employees while PDFs are not; their funding comes to Brown from an external agency and is paid as a stipend. Because of this, it used to be the case that Fellows were simply not eligible for benefits. In 2004, health benefits were made available to this group but (because of federal tax regulations) these are considered taxable income. Since PDRAs and PDFs often work side by side, doing virtually the same work, postdocs naturally perceive this situation as inequitable.

There is a particular distinction in Humanities and Social Sciences departments where the “postdoctoral fellow” title generally is used for postdocs, in large measure because “fellow” is regarded as the appropriate title in these disciplines for professional reasons. However, these postdocs are often paid with University funds. Because they are therefore clearly Brown employees, they are entitled to benefits and the appropriate title should properly be postdoctoral research associate. These anomalies need to be addressed. While the issue requires additional review, it is our understanding that many of our peer institutions address both this problem and the tax issue previously described by providing institutional funds that equalize pay and benefits across the board and therefore allow titles to reflect functional or disciplinary distinctions.

We recommend several next steps: First, the question of how tax law applies to PDFs needs further explanation and communication. Second, for benefits that must be taxed, the University should consider offering an institutional supplement to close the gap. We recognize this may not be possible at this time but the cost of moving toward that solution should be investigated. In the near term, we must make every effort to explain the implications of appointments and advise postdocs switching from PDRAs to PDFs to seek the advice of a tax professional. The Postdoc page on the HR website provides a place to post this information. The OGPS is creating a Benefits FAQ which will help clarify these issues. Exploring outside resources for benefits specifically tailored to postdocs as well as their benefit administration might yield solutions to this problem.

6. *Review of teaching appointments.*

Postdocs are often recruited for research positions, particularly in the life sciences, but wish to acquire teaching experience to be competitive for faculty jobs in the future. Many are taking advantage of the Sheridan Center resources; however, classroom experience can be difficult to obtain. If a significant teaching role is identified, such as substitution for a faculty member on sabbatical or via the Office of Continuing Education, departments and mentors

may believe that they are required to reduce effort on a research grant to allow time to be devoted to teaching. However, incidental and non-recurring teaching roles for grant supported postdocs are often permissible via OMB A21 guidelines without changes in grant effort. A centralized means to match postdoc expertise and availability with teaching needs would facilitate the desire of postdocs to acquire teaching experience, and could have significant curricular benefits for the University as well. Further work is needed to determine where such efforts might reside. Grants that support postdocs can also be written to incorporate a percentage of effort devoted to teaching from the outset, and some departments are beginning to explore this option.

7. *Review of services to postdocs and resources for professional development.*

The Working Group acknowledges that there is still work to be done to enhance support for postdocs' professional development. The Graduate School, OGPS, Career Development Center and Sheridan Center provide workshops and presentations throughout the year and are actively collaborating on making these enrichment opportunities known to postdocs. Some peer institutions are able to provide an institutional allowance to postdocs for conference travel, enhancement of benefits, childcare or other career advancement. We have not yet developed specific recommendations in this area.

8. *The need to strengthen search procedures when hiring new postdocs.*

We believe that Brown should be a leader in developing and utilizing processes that recruit as diverse an applicant pool as possible and in continually striving to identify postdocs of the highest caliber to become members of our academic community. In the course of our meetings we learned that many postdoc appointments currently result from a pre-selection process. While preselects may sometimes be appropriate, open searches are consistent with federal requirements, Brown's search processes, and with our desire to hire the best possible candidates. A search process for postdocs more closely aligned to the faculty processes seems desirable but we recognize this issue is complicated and requires further study. We recommend that the University charge a group of faculty and staff to carefully investigate policies and procedures for postdoctoral searches next year and identify strategies and incentives to broaden the candidate pools and thus enhance Brown's competitive position.

Conclusion

The Working Group identified a number of areas in which the University can and should continue to make progress in supporting postdoctoral research associates and fellows. We recommend concrete and immediate steps in several areas:

- New policies for vacation, sick time, and maternity and medical leave have been established; the Handbook for Academic Administration and any other relevant reference sites should be updated to reflect these changes.
- Better coordination of appointments between the Dean of the Faculty office and Graduate School

- Improving inter-office tracking of postdocs
- Establishing a single web point of entry for postdocs

We also identified several topics that require additional study. Chief among these issues are strengthening search procedures for postdocs and further examining and communicating tax requirements for Postdoctoral Fellows. The policy for postdoc eligibility for paid time off on University holidays should be clarified. In addition, greater opportunities for postdoc professional development, support of teaching opportunities and providing long-term solutions for matters currently ameliorated through inter-office business processes are continuing concerns.

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