

Endocrine Society comments in response to [NOT-OD-23-084](#), “Request for Information (RFI): Re-envisioning U.S. Postdoctoral Research Training and Career Progression within the Biomedical Research Enterprise.”

Response was informed by members of the Research Affairs Core Committee (RACC) and postdoc members of the Society.

Comments submitted electronically via online [submission form](#) on April 14, 2023.

Perspectives on the roles and responsibilities of the academic postdoc (e.g., what the postdoctoral position means to you, how you view it).

On behalf of the Endocrine Society, thank you for considering our comments on re-envisioning US postdoctoral research training and career progression. In addition to our comments, we also support and endorse the comments submitted separately by the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB).

- We believe the postdoc definition or period should:
 - Serve as a bridge to the desired career by providing “specialization” to prepare for a career transition, which should not be assumed to be an academic tenure-track position.
 - Specifically state the individual has obtained a PhD.
 - Have an expectation of maintaining a healthy work-life balance by providing sufficient salary and benefits, along with a professional culture that respects and values this balance.
 - Incorporate policies that are equitable for all populations, including caregiver, international, neurodivergent, and other groups.
- The postdoc definition or period should not:
 - Use the word “trainee”; this term has historically been used as justification to withhold benefits from postdocs, does not recognize the extensive training they have already completed, and fails to recognize professional expertise and experience already acquired. We note that a newly minted PhD beginning their career outside of academia is not generally considered a “trainee”. Alternative terms that would elevate this position include postgraduate scientist/investigator, early career investigator, or resident (akin to post-medical school specialization).
 - Have a specific timeframe; a “temporary” position could imply that the individual should not be invested in by the mentor or institution. However, this should not be considered a permanent position either; using a “bridge to a desired career” in the definition could prevent this potential issue.



- Solely replicate training received during the PhD. The postdoc should include professional skills such as mentorship, grant writing, or others that are transferrable to their desired career.

Fundamental issues and challenges inhibiting recruitment, retention, and overall quality of life of postdoctoral trainees in academic research.

- Lack of adequate benefits are a major issue; benefits and salaries are variable between, and even within, institutions. For example, obtaining external funding can prevent a postdoc from access to institutional benefits, including health insurance. This can depend on the details of the institution's employment classification of postdocs, which may not be clear to the individual during the postdoc search.
 - Furthermore, many postdocs choose to start families during this time, and variable access to benefits such as affordable on-site childcare creates substantial barriers.
 - The current NIH salary scale is not sufficient to cover cost-of-living in most locations. We request that NIH provide transparency about how they determine the salary scale and critically evaluate how this scale is provided nation-wide.
- Postdoc positions, when defined as “temporary”, can prevent access to employer-matched retirement accounts, with long-term negative impacts on financial outlook.
 - The temporary status can also create unnecessary hurdles for international postdocs that are on temporary visas.
- The expectation to move to a different location for the postdoc can create barriers that negatively impact careers, such as financial burdens associated with relocation and other disruptions that disproportionately affect postdocs with caregiving responsibilities or individuals with other attachments to their current community. Furthermore, moving away from existing support networks may contribute to feelings of isolation often reported by postdocs.

Existing NIH policies, programs, or resources that could be modified, expanded, or improved to enhance the postdoctoral training ecosystem and academic research career pathways.

While many barriers to postdoc quality of life come from their direct employer/institution, NIH is still a powerful institution that can lead the way to generate change. We suggest that NIH:

- Explore including the treatment of postdocs, i.e. the benefits they are provided, in the assessment of “institutional environment” during the peer review process of grant applications. This would incentivize institutions to provide appropriate benefits to postdocs in order to continue receiving federal funding from NIH, which is the primary funder of biological and biomedical sciences. This could also lead to benefits for



postdocs more broadly at the institution for those that may be funded through agencies outside of NIH.

- NIH adjust the Grants Policy Statement (GPS) to expand allowable costs for benefits beyond health insurance and allow funding from multiple federal sources.
- Clarify GPS language to allow fellows to maintain an employer-employee relationship with their institution, which would allow them to continue receiving benefits despite being on a fellowship.
- Create additional funding opportunities for international postdocs.
- Use Institutional Research and Academic Career Development Awards (IRACDA) as a model for postdoc transition into a desired career. While IRACDA is designed for teaching-focused careers, similar programs could be generated to prepare postdocs for careers in lab management, science policy, science writing, industry, etc.
- Invest in funding mechanisms that do not tie postdocs directly to an individual advisor; this could combat substantial power dynamics that link the future “success” of the postdoc to the relationship with their advisor. A model for this type of mechanism is the Katz ESI award, which supports innovative projects and does not require preliminary data.

Proven or promising external resources or approaches that could inform NIH’s efforts to enhance the postdoctoral training ecosystem (e.g., improving postdoctoral recruitment, training, working environment, mentoring, job satisfaction).

The majority of resources currently available to postdocs are at the institutional level: salary, benefits, term limits, etc. Many of the dissatisfactions that exist for postdocs are beyond the policy level and extend to the human one: lack of emotional support networks, affordable childcare support, and sufficient mental health care, all can contribute to a distressed quality of life. We encourage the NIH to support:

- Childcare cost reimbursements through federal grants. Postdocs funded through some private grants have access to this benefit, which makes an enormous difference.
- Equitable methods for senior PhDs to search for and obtain postdocs that don’t rely solely on the network of their mentor.
- Strengthening relationships with extramural organizations dedicated to improving postdocs’ quality of life, such as the National Postdoctoral Association, and partnering to encourage widespread adoption of already identified recommended policies and practices.
- Work closely with institutions to communicate updates to the Grants Policy Statement, including the intended spirit and outcomes of the updated policies. NIH must keep in mind that universities typically interpret these policies to save as much money as possible, usually at the expense of postdoc benefits and programs.



- Working with external organizations to classify or rank institutions based on the level of support they provide to postdocs. This could increase pressure on institutions to improve in this area, as well as provide criteria for senior PhDs to choose an institution with a supportive environment.
- Apply existing methods to track postdoc conversion to tenure track faculty. NIH could assess these data and support institutional programs that use these methods for tracking careers after the postdoc in academia and other fields.