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Formation of a Postdoctoral Association at The University of Calgary

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A major player in fulfilling the research mandate of universities is the postdoctoral fellow ("postdoc"). Indeed, despite the fact that postdocs generate a great proportion of "cutting-edge" research, they often find themselves falling into a nebulous gray area, being neither student nor faculty, with little support or group identity. This perception was substantiated in our recent interdisciplinary national study of Canadian postdocs that identified key issues of concern to this group (1-3). These included a perceived low value placed on postdocs by institutions, lack of benefits, low pay, and considerable concern about career advancement.

How can these issues best be addressed? Because 77% of postdocs are in a university setting (2), much of the support mechanisms needed are already in place and only require adaptation to address the specific needs and concerns of postdocs. A major hurdle, however, is identifying the postdoc pool at specific institutions and subsequently providing a collective voice to make these concerns known. An effective way to accomplish this, which was enthusiastically supported by 62% of postdocs in the national survey (2), was the creation of postdoctoral associations at their respective institutions.

Very few universities have taken the steps to form postdoctoral associations (4), but recently, several key initiatives have been undertaken at The University of Calgary to do just that. Begun by a group of dedicated postdocs, the "Postdoctoral Association of The University of Calgary" (PDAC) has stressed from the outset that the university and postdocs must work together through constant dialogue to initiate constructive change.

This approach results in obvious benefits for both parties: Postdocs gain much-needed support and recognition for their contributions to the research community, and the university gains vital insight into and appreciation of an important group contributing to its research and teaching excellence. We have been very fortunate to find this level of vision among many faculty members and administrators. As a result, we have been able to make important strides in the improvement of the postdoctoral experience at The University of Calgary. This article is intended to share some of the progress made and highlight some future directions with the intent to help other universities set up their own postdoctoral associations.

PDAC has five specific missions to fulfill in the university:

1. To provide a collective voice for the issues of particular relevance and interest to postdocs.
2. To provide a liaison between postdocs and the administration of The University of Calgary.
3. To promote and develop effective training and career counseling of postdocs at The University of Calgary.
4. To develop and maintain The University of Calgary Postdoctoral Registry.
5. To disseminate information pertinent to postdocs.

The first and most important issue facing PDAC was identifying the group that it is meant to represent. As is the case at other universities, no central database of postdoctoral associates existed at The University of Calgary. PDAC, in conjunction with the Faculty of Medicine and Financial Services, is in the process of identifying this group and setting up a university-wide registry. Setting up this registry quickly became a difficult and arduous task, because classification of postdocs has been haphazard and ambiguous. Using a working definition of "postdoc" as an individual holding a temporary, "soft-money" research position after receiving a Ph.D. who is not employed as a technician or faculty member, we found that this definition spanned (but was not limited to) a variety of titles that

included research assistant/associate/scientist, postdoctoral assistant/associate/fellow, and support staff. An additional complicator was that within each of these categories, individuals had diverse credentials ranging from college diploma, to MD, to Ph.D.

Thus, the dire need for clear classification of postdocs is very apparent. Not only was this important for group identification, but it became very important in addressing issues pertaining to access to benefits and employee status (see below). Thus, the university has consented to work toward reclassifying all postdocs under one heading: "postdoctoral associate" (5). Although this is an important step, a clearer distinction between "junior" postdoctoral associates (up to 3 years post-Ph.D.) and "senior" postdoctoral associates (greater than 3 years post-Ph.D.), perhaps by reserving the term "research scientist" to the latter group, is still required to differentiate between a training period and that beyond.

Through mass e-mailing, phone calling, and announcements on our PDAC Web site (6), we have been able to identify over 120 confirmed postdocs. (This is not all-inclusive yet.) The highest concentration of postdocs was found to be in medical biochemistry, chemistry, and engineering, but there was representation found among almost all faculties. This is just the beginning. PDAC hopes to develop a good way to maintain the database such that all postdocs are included and the database remains current. Possible ways to do this are by having new postdoctoral appointees fill out a registration form while submitting payroll information or via the human resources department. In addition, The University of Calgary would be in an ideal position to contribute regular updates to the Canadian National Postdoctoral Registry (7).

In a continued dialogue with The University of Calgary administration, PDAC has worked toward improving the situation of postdoctoral associates, particularly with respect to access to benefits and recognition of an employer/employee relationship with The University of Calgary. Postdoc income is usually classified in one of three ways: 1) as employment income when paid from a research grant held by the supervisor, 2) as fellowship/scholarship income when paid on behalf of a third party (i.e., granting agency) which is given on a competitive basis, and 3) as a research grant when requested to do so and if permitted by the third party.

Each classification method has different ramifications with respect to employee and taxation status and, as such, determines eligibility for access to benefits. Our national survey (2) has clearly identified deficits in the access to certain types of benefits, particularly employment insurance, worker's compensation/disability, and parental leave, because, more often than not, postdocs are not classified as employees of either their place of work or of the agency that funds them. In order to address this taxation/employment status disparity, The University of Calgary in conjunction with PDAC has taken the initiative to reclassify all postdocs under one classification, postdoctoral associates, which sees them as trust/project employees of the university with access to WCB, EI, CPP, and RRSP contributions. So far, this reclassification has been voluntary and initiated by the individual postdoc (please refer to the information on the PDAC Web site) with extensive support of Financial Services and the VP (Research) office, but we are targeting a global switch to this classification in the near future for all postdocs in the university.

PDAC has made significant strides toward increasing the profile of postdoctoral associates and issues of concern to them. To enhance communication and dissemination of information among postdocs, PDAC has regular monthly general meetings and maintains its own Web site. This site (6) provides important local information for postdocs as well as links to several national and international sites, including online employment sites, granting agencies, and career counseling sites. A postdoc registration form to update our local registry is also available. Through this site, we have been able to provide accurate and detailed information about changing the tax status of postdocs at The University of Calgary and are working, in conjunction with the Faculty of Medicine, to make a postdoc orientation handbook available online. Eventually, we would like to provide links and discussion groups with other postdoctoral associations across the country.

As career trends now encompass a substantially broader spectrum of opportunity than academic employment, professional guidance is something that postdocs need more of. An important mandate for PDAC is to promote and develop effective training and career counseling for postdocs. Some departments and research groups have made considerable efforts to provide forums and opportunity for postdocs to learn more about novel career options. Last fall, the Faculty of Medicine organized a very successful 2-day Career Management Workshop for postdocs and graduate students. This included teaching general management skills

as well as tips on grant writing, preparing CVs, entrepreneurship, perspectives on academia, and conflict management.

PDAC is currently working to bring in speakers representing a variety of career paths who are able to provide different perspectives on career options. Other PDAC initiatives include establishment of minimum guidelines defining an adequate training environment for postdocs and generating a university policy on minimum salary. In addition, PDAC is working to increase postdoc involvement on committees and encouraging departments and faculties to solicit the opinions and input of postdocs.

This essay serves to provide a glimpse into the efforts of the postdocs at The University of Calgary in hopes of increasing the profile of this significant group of researchers across Canada. By addressing the specific issues of concern to postdocs and, hence, acknowledging the important role they play in the university and research communities at large, a brighter future for universities and the maintenance of a vibrant scientific research community in Canada can be ensured.

References and Notes

1. C. C. Helbing, M. J. Verhoef, P. A. J. Forsyth, C. L. Wellington, **"Painting a face on a faceless group of scientists: Postdoctoral fellows in the biological sciences and physical sciences training in Canada and Canadians training abroad."** Science's Next Wave, <http://www.nextwave.org>, 1996.
2. C. Helbing, M. Verhoef, C. Wellington, "Finding identity and voice: A national survey of Canadian postdoctoral fellows," submitted.
3. Funded by The University of Calgary, NSERC, MRC, SSHRC and AHFMR.
4. Other universities have taken positive steps to address postdoctoral issues. For example, the University of Ottawa has recently formed a postdoctoral association, and the University of British Columbia has begun a career-development seminar series for postdocs.
5. The term "postdoctoral associate" was seen as a more desirable descriptor than "postdoctoral fellow" because it removed the perception that this was a student position.
6. Site address: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~pdac>
7. To register for the Canadian National Postdoctoral Registry, please contact the author. This includes postdoctoral associates who are currently in Canada and Canadians training abroad.