

Postdoc Data Collection and Tracking
GREAT Group Postdoctorate Section Leaders Annual Meeting, Seattle
Breakout Session Notes
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Emilda Rivers—NSF Postdoc Data Project

Classifying postdocs

- Postdocs are not classified the same way at all institutions.
- Challenging to classify MDs and clinical fellows engaged in research training. Should they be classified as residents or postdocs? Classification changes from year to year.
- Challenging to classify postdocs employed in industry. Some organizations (e.g., Genentech and Novartis) classify postdoctoral positions as training positions; others consider postdoctoral training a “trial period” during which postdocs are being evaluated for longer-term employment.
- NSF’s GSS survey should include questions that encourage institutional officials to consider which individuals should be classified as postdocs.

Collecting data on postdocs

- Collecting postdoc data from affiliated hospitals is a challenge. There is not always a centralized reporting system, and there is a risk of double counting postdocs.
- Ms. Rivers described the challenges of working with the Department of Homeland Security to obtain information on postdocs who received their PhD from a foreign institution. Participants noted that many institutions are already gathering information on foreign vs. domestic postdocs and suggested that asking the institutions to report these data to NSF would be easier than the process NSF is going through.
- Can NSF mandate that private organizations provide postdoc data if they want NSF funding? As grant agencies, NSF and NIH should have leverage with institutions.

Suggested modifications to the GSS Postdoc Definition

- The language “works under the supervision of a *senior* scholar” is problematic because lecturers, instructors, and junior faculty may be responsible for training postdocs. It was suggested that “senior” be changed to “more senior.”
- The definition should include the phrase “mentored training” as in the NIH/NSF definition.
- To capture individuals taking teaching positions, the language “the appointment is primarily for training in *research or scholarship*” should be changed to “the appointment is primarily for training in *research, teaching, or scholarship*.”

Other comments

- With regard to collecting data on postdocs, institutions do not necessarily have the same goals as NSF, NIH, or Congress. Institutions want to know how to allocate their resources and improve their programs; they do not necessarily want to know whether we are meeting workforce demands on a national level.

Christine Des Jarlais—Postdoc Exit Surveys

Incentives for postdocs to complete exit surveys

- Raffle items such as Ipods.
- Duke University encourages undergraduate students to provide data by donating money to any charity the undergraduate selects.
- Some participants noted that their institutions can not provide financial incentives for survey completion.
- Several participants said that students and postdocs at their universities want access to the alumni or other networking databases.
- Vanderbilt University has a two-part survey: one part is anonymous; the other part includes respondents' names, which can be used to populate a networking database.

Identifying postdocs for exit survey

- Not all institutions know when their postdocs start and end their appointments.
- Some Postdoc Offices (e.g. University of Colorado Health Sciences Center) must approve letter of hire for all postdocs and others approve appointment and/or termination letters. This practice is a good way to centralize accounting for postdocs, enforce postdoc policies, and enable administration of an exit survey.
- University of Washington sends exit survey with their term-limit reminder

What is the best way to track postdocs?

- Alumni and development offices were suggested as mechanism for tracking postdocs.
- Some participants noted that because postdocs are not necessarily alumni of the institution, they can not be included in the alumni database.
- Some institutions' development offices are very interested in tracking postdocs; others are not, because they don't see postdocs as future donors.

Collecting sensitive information

- Postdocs may be reluctant to provide information on their postdoctoral experience out of concern that they will be identified. These concerns are present even at institutions with large postdoc populations and when surveys are anonymous.
- To improve confidentiality, some institutions use a third party contractor to collect and aggregate postdoc data (e.g. Dana Farber Cancer Center).
- If the survey is anonymous, it is considered an "exempt protocol" and does not need to be reviewed by an IRB.

Survey technology

- Is it necessary to build new software to conduct an exit survey, or is Survey Monkey or another commercial system appropriate?
- Medical College of Wisconsin has internal infrastructure ("Angel" system), to identify personnel, but they have to be at the institution; it can not be used for tracking postdocs once they leave
- University of Washington also has its own infrastructure