

COLLECTING NATIONAL POSTDOC DATA: INCORPORATING A GRASSROOTS APPROACH

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While standardized data collected on doctoral recipient outcomes has been ongoing, the last comprehensive national survey of postdoctoral researchers was the 2005 Sigma Xi “Doctors without Orders” report. Other data collectors, such as the National Postdoctoral Association and the NSF Early Career Doctorate Surveys rely on a top-down approach wherein the contacted institutional administrations distribute surveys internally. These participating institutions tend to have a postdoctoral office and other forms of institutional postdoc support or specific postdoc policies. Therefore, top-down approaches alone may miss certain aspects of the postdoctoral experience in less well-developed environments. Data collection efforts continue to be hampered by the ad hoc nature of postdoctoral positions - there is no standard title system or training expectations - and without comprehensive collection it is not possible to compare institutional data to national data.

At the University of Chicago, the Postdoctoral Association has been surveying and collecting data for over a decade as a “status check” of the institutional postdoctoral experience. To address the deficiency of national data regarding the broader postdoctoral experience, the PDA’s Survey Committee designed a national survey. In an effort to maximize participation for all postdocs, regardless of institutional environment, the survey team also designed an implementation plan that was both top-down and grassroots.

For the top-down approach, the survey team and the postdoctoral affairs administrator collaborated on a spreadsheet that listed doctoral degree institutions sorted by academic conference. Contact information for each institution was entered (including websites, email addresses, names and titles) for Postdoctoral Offices, Postdoctoral Associations, as well as Offices of Research, Deans of Graduate Schools, Provosts or any other administrative offices that appeared to represent postdoctoral researchers. If an institution did not have a postdoctoral office, we tried to determine who had oversight regarding postdoctoral researchers such as a representative from an Office of Research, Graduate School, or ultimately the university’s Provost Office. We used this information to simultaneously contact those who we determined were most likely to represent postdocs at each institution, including any listed postdoctoral association or society contacts.

To bolster the grass-roots approach, the survey team launched a website that could be freely shared on social media and by email, which explained the survey aims and contained a standard contact form. This form allowed any individual (in most cases a postdoc or administrator) who had not been reached via the top-down approach to participate in the survey through this secondary means of contact. First, we responded to the individual to determine whether the survey was not disseminated by the institutional representative previously contacted, if that contact information was not accurate or out of date, or when no central mailing list for postdocs was likely to exist. From this information, grass-roots approaches included updating the institutional representative information, adding new or more appropriate institutional contacts, or using an alternate dissemination method such as the individual postdocs sharing directly with other postdocs at their. An example of this method was establishing contact with the Boston Postdoc Coalition, is a group of postdoc representatives from several Boston area institutions. This group provided another method of contact, especially for Boston institutions without a postdoctoral office.

These methods were first tested and tweaked by sending out through the academic consortium the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC, now the Big Ten Alliance) in the first month as a pilot phase. During the approximately six months that the 2016 National Postdoc Survey was open, more than 7,600 responses were collected with at least one postdoc respondent from all 50 states and covering over 300 institutions. In comparison, the 2005 "Doctors without Orders" Sigma Xi survey which collected over a longer period of months from 2003-2005 collected 7,600 responses from 46 institutions and 17 states. The unique dual approach used to disseminate the 2016 National Postdoc Survey contributed to a much broader sampling of postdocs from across different institutional environments and an overall more comprehensive assessment of U.S. postdoctoral experiences.