

TRANSPARENT TRAINEE-DRIVEN DATA COLLECTION

GARY S. MCDOWELL
FUTURE OF RESEARCH

Junior scientists are currently interested in data about salaries, benefits, career and training outcomes, and other aspects of academic training, to be able to make informed decisions about, and have agency in, their training. We have called for greater transparency in career outcomes (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/25870234>).

Data about many of these aspects is extremely difficult to find, despite repeated calls for greater transparency from multiple reports from the National Academies. This abstract proposes greater involvement of junior researchers themselves in holding institutions accountable, by collecting data and making it openly available. Not only does it appear to be a major factor in driving institutional change, but by being actively engaged it can inform the junior research community of what information is available, enabling them to make informed decisions. This change in expectations, and ability to compare institutions, may lead to implementation of much-needed, and long-desired, reforms at institutions.

Case Study: The Fair Labor Standards Act and Postdocs

Postdoctoral salaries have been the subject of repeated recommendations, most recently in the 2014 National Academies report, “The Postdoctoral Experience Revisited”:

“The NIH should raise the NRSA postdoctoral starting salary to \$50,000 (2014 dollars), and adjust it annually for inflation. Postdoctoral salaries should be appropriately higher where regional cost of living, disciplinary norms, and institutional or sector salary scales dictate higher salaries.¹ In addition, host institutions should provide benefits to postdoctoral researchers that are appropriate to their level of experience and commensurate with benefits given to equivalent full-time employees.”

A recent opportunity mandating a step in this direction came with the updates to the Fair Labor Standards Act in 2016, currently blocked by a court injunction. The proposed raise to \$47,476 fell below the 2014 recommendation of a basic floor of \$50,000, but was still actively opposed by institutional organizations such as the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR), and the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), who wrote in their letter to the Department of Labor:

“Any increase in the salary threshold for exemption should be graduated and incremental. AAMC recommends an initial threshold that does not exceed the National Institutes of Health (NIH) guidelines for postdoctoral stipends, currently set at \$42,840 for new trainees in [fiscal year] 2015. In addition, postdoctoral scientists should be considered salaried, FLSA-exempt “learned professionals,” similar to medical residents.”

While these institutional efforts did not result in exemption of the postdoc from the updates, they indicate concerted resistance at the institutional level to some recommendations from blue-ribbon panels. We have identified institutional opposition, or lack of action, as a barrier to change.

Postdoctoral researchers, assisting our organization, helped to gather data on how individual institutions were implementing the updates to the FLSA, and their reaction to its blocked implementation creating the “FLSA and postdocs resource” (<http://futureofresearch.org/flsa-and-postdocs/>).

Through testimonials from administrators and postdocs, this transparent resource affected decisions at institutions, by allowing direct comparison with peer institutions and public scrutiny of their actions. Similar efforts have been undertaken by the Boston Postdoctoral Association to compare benefits for postdocs across all Boston institutions (<https://f1000research.com/posters/6-442>).

Transparency about academia is necessary to allow junior scientists to make rational decisions about their training. Institutions respond to transparent efforts to make them accountable. This abstract proposes greater transparency at institutions, either through public institutional data dissemination, or undergraduate-, graduate student- and postdoc-led data collection efforts. **Publicly-available data can then begin to allow institutional comparisons, enabling junior scientists to make informed decisions about their scientific training, and enabling institutions to provide more realistic opportunities.**