

Postdoctoral Association Notes

July 19, 2006

Attending: Nilesh Banavali, Judy Cannon, Yuanzin Hu, Cheng Huang, Imogen Hurley, Kolla Kristjansdottir, James McCracken, Ayaz Sayeed, Isaac Skromne, Andie Ward, Nancy Schwartz, Parag Shah, Melissa Lindberg **Absent:** Dibyendu Bhattacharyya, Steve Crone, Rifat Hasina, Charles Lo, Thelma Tennant, Zhenwei Zhang.

Introductions: The PDA Committee has grown significantly in the past year, and because of that growth it was decided to formalize the structure of the Committee. Imogen Hurley serves as President, and will continue as President in the upcoming year. Judy Cannon serves as Secretary, and will continue as Secretary for 2006-2007. Isaac Skromne was in charge of the Seminar Series last year; for 2006-2007, a Seminar Series Committee will share this responsibility. Members of that committee include I. Skromne, Ayaz Sayeed, Kolla Kristjansdottir, and Yuanxin Hu. For 2005-2006 Andie Ward served as Social Chair, maintained the listserve, and sent out Weekly Bulletins and other announcements. Since A. Ward is leaving to take a job, J. Cannon will take over the listserve and announcements responsibilities. Social events will be planned as part of the Seminar Series. I. Hurley served as Webmaster in the past year, and will continue to do so in 2006-2007. Thelma Tennant started work on an Orientation packet in 2005-2006; I. Hurley asked for a volunteer to complete it in 2006-2007. One area not previously covered was foreign postdoc affairs; in 2006-2007 there will be a representative for foreign postdoc affairs who will be designated at a later meeting. Dean Nancy Schwartz, Parag Shah and Melissa Lindberg were introduced to the new members of the committee.

2005-2006 Summary

Seminars: I. Skromne reported on the Seminar Series. In 2005-2006, one seminar per week was held, as it was determined that continuity was important as the series started. Postdocs would know that there was always a seminar or social event Friday afternoon at 4 pm. They averaged between 20-30 people per seminar, with some seminars being extremely popular with approximately 50 attending. The low end of attendance was around eighteen. The least popular seminars tended to occur around long weekends, when significant numbers of people had left early. The talks by postdocs tended to have lower attendance, as they were on very specific scientific topics. Also there was some difficulty in arranging the postdoc talks, with some postdocs agreeing to give a presentation and then backing out just before it was scheduled. The career seminars and social events were well attended. Some PDAs at other universities organize one big event once a year, but I. Skromne gave the opinion that it was easier to organize a seminar series throughout the year. This series seems to be relatively unique: I. Hurley reported that at the NPA meeting, people she talked to were very impressed that the BSD PDA was running a weekly series. Feedback from postdocs seems to have been generally positive about the series. Catering for the seminars and social events went fairly smoothly: we ran out of food a few times, which was due to uncertainty about the numbers prior to the event, since we didn't require RSVPs.

E-mail communications: A. Ward reported that she produced a Weekly Bulletin last year to cut down on the number of e-mails received by postdocs, with a list of contents at the top so that postdocs could concentrate on what was interesting to them in the Bulletin.

The Bulletin included job openings, announcements, seminar listings, etc. She would also send out a reminder about the seminar at the end of the week. There are over 40 Weekly Bulletins archived on the website. She also made posters for the weekly seminars, which were then printed on colored paper. M. Lindberg updates the postdoc list, and sent A. Ward revised lists on average of once a month.

Website: I. Hurley reported that she had gotten some positive feedback on the website; one regret was not having a counter put in so that we would know the number of hits it has received. That can be done now, but there is no way of recovering the past data. She would like a volunteer to go through the website and be critical so that it can be made more useful in the upcoming year, and make sure all the links still work, etc. J. McCracken noted he had found the web site useful once he had found it, but it did take him several months to find it. There was then discussion on how to point new postdocs to that information soon after their arrival.

Survey: N. Banavali put together a survey on SurveyMonkey.com. They got 140 responses; the promise of prizes probably helped drive the numbers up. N. Banavali presented the graphical data from the survey; he noted he intends to write up a report. It was suggested that he write a comparative report, using data from the previous survey in 2001 to compare to the 2006 data. There was some discussion about what the apparent salary discrepancies meant. N. Schwartz noted that all appointments are reviewed by her, and one thing she looks for is that the salary level follows NIH NRSA guidelines. She rejects those that do not. However, there is some leniency after years of service: while all postdocs now start at least at the NIH NRSA year 0 recommended level, some P.I.'s are able to find reasons not to give the recommended salary increases; so it often drops off after 2-3 years. One aspect of funding can be unclear: foreign nationals may have grants from their home governments, and the P.I. then will make up the difference between that funding and the NIH NRSA level, but only the University of Chicago pay is reported. That can mean that it looks like foreign nationals are paid less, when they are really at parity. There is some income disparity with Postdoc Fellows as well. N. Schwartz noted that while you cannot supplement NIH NRSA funding with federal funds, you can supplement outside fellowship funding with federal funds. There was an interest in seeing data broken down by department, but N. Banavali stressed that the more you break down the data the fewer the numbers are and therefore they lose significance.

Benefits: I. Hurley put together a page listing the benefits for each type of postdoc, so that postdocs could have one place to look and see what their benefits are and how they change (i.e., benefit differences between scholars and fellows). That is posted on the website. She has also put together a written explanation of benefits for fellows, since she received many questions on them. This has been reviewed by N. Schwartz, but I. Hurley has not been able to get the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA) to review it. N. Schwartz will bring it up with the appropriate people. The OAA does not have one person to deal with post doc issues: the responsibilities are divided between two people by department.

Overall, the PDA feels that real progress has been made in the past year, and is in a good place to take the lessons learned forward.

2006-2007 Plans

N. Schwartz noted that one area that the University has been lacking is in conflict resolution for postdocs. There is no ombudsman for postdoc grievances, and no one route to solve disputes. She noted that she sees at least two disputes a year cross her desk, mostly over authorship issues. She is talking to the Provost's Office about a University-wide system for dealing with these concerns.

I. Hurley has been talking to Kathy Purnell in the Physical Sciences Division, as they are impressed with the BSD PDA. I. Hurley will continue discussions and encourage the PSD to set up their own PDA, and collaboration can occur when appropriate. The PSD likes the BSD model of postdoctoral scholars; that system may be set up University-wide.

Seminars: The seminars will continue mostly as they were the previous year. There will not be seminars planned for the Friday before a long weekend. After much discussion, they will continue to be on Fridays at 4 pm. K. Kristjansdottir will handle the catering responsibilities for the fall, while Ayaz will put together posters. The focus will be on seminars of more general interest: core facilities, panels of faculty to talk about search committees and what they're looking for in job candidates, perhaps outside faculty from smaller institutions as well, career-focused seminars, etc. They will bring in outside speakers as well: for instance, from Pharma companies. N. Schwartz commented that there may be an opportunity during the Pew Symposium for faculty from liberal arts colleges to speak to the postdocs, and that there is a seminar on careers in liberal arts colleges for graduate students and postdocs on a Saturday (November 4th). The scientific talks last year were not as broadly attended. There was discussion about the usefulness of having postdocs who are currently engaged in a job search give their job talks, and perhaps answer questions related to their searches; the seminar committee said that they will not discourage them but will not be actively soliciting those types of talks. Posters will be distributed via e-mail for posting; there was discussion about how to ensure they are printed on colored paper, which was effective last year in catching attention.

Orientation packet: I. Hurley stressed that the Orientation packet should be very BSD-specific, as there are places to find the general information. She would like to distribute to incoming postdocs a publication (such as *Chicago Life* or *A Selective Guide to Life in Hyde Park and Chicago*) so our packet can be focused on BSD concerns. K. Kristjansdottir agreed to help her with this project. We need to find the best way to get new postdocs information as soon as they are appointed; perhaps a meeting with administrators to stress the importance of this would help. Also, M. Lindberg could flag the new postdocs on the lists she receives from OAA, and send out a general welcoming e-mail which points them to the PDA web site.

Appointment Letter: N. Schwartz said there were no updates on this since the last meeting. The language in this letter is still being discussed. It is still in the pipeline.

Postdoc Representatives: I. Hurley noted that some postdocs have expressed to her a desire for the PDA to represent them in the larger community. Are there University committee that would be appropriate for a postdoc representative to lend a voice to? Or at the departmental level? N. Schwartz said that as they are moving forward with plans

to change the postdoc system University-wide, it will be important to have a postdoc voice present in the discussions.

NPP PDA: I. Hurley said they would like to encourage more departmental postdoc associations, and that perhaps these departmental postdoc associations could then provided representation at the departmental level. NPP is modifying their seminar series: they will continue to hold scientific talks, but not a career day next year. This would be a good model for other departmental PDAs.

Individual Developmental Plans: A. Ward has done some work in collecting IDPs from other institutions. She feels that it is important to do self-assessment plans as postdocs, and to have them signed off by both the postdoc and the mentor. It is important to think about what progress has been made in the past year, and what are the goals for the upcoming year – and to have both mentor and trainee agree. This should be part of the reappointment process. She asked for a volunteer to continue working on this project in 2006/7.