

Postdoc Association Notes December 2, 2005

Attending: Judy Cannon, Steve Gasior (visiting), Imogen Hurley, Charles Lo, Isaac Skromme, Andie Ward, Nancy Schwartz, Melissa Lindberg **Absent:** Dibyendu Bhattacharyya, Thelma Tennant, Parag Shah

Announcements: Nancy Schwartz announced that Sigma Xi and the National Postdoctoral Association are having an invitational meeting in January on professionalizing the postdoctoral experience, which she plans to attend. She also reminded the group that the NPA has its annual meeting in April: I. Hurley indicated that she'd like to go again. If anyone else would like to go, please let Melissa Lindberg know. N. Schwartz also noted that NIH is planning on reducing the amount the federal government contributes to tuition for graduate students; this might affect postdocs who are on a fellowship from the federal government.

Discussion:

Mentoring: I. Hurley brought up the subject of mentoring of postdocs. When Pat Shymanski spoke to the postdocs, it was clear that most of those in the room (about 50 or so) had no idea that there were mentoring plans in place, or that they were supposed to be being mentored. N. Schwartz noted that the postdoc operations are split between Academic Affairs and the Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs: the OGPA did not have the staff or resources to absorb the human resources part of postdoctoral affairs. However, N. Schwartz does review each application, and looks at three criteria when she does so: 1) stipends – they must be in line with the NIH scale; 2) eligibility – there is a five year rule that is pretty strictly adhered to; and 3) mentor plan: this is in the hands of the department and the designated faculty. Some departments use a boiler plate: each mentoring plan is identical for the entire department. She noted the handouts for the meeting included the list she had put together of topics that must be covered in the mentoring plan, and a full example of an Individual Development Plan. Not everyone has been following the guidelines, and now may be the time to push on the mentoring program. N. Schwartz also distributed a draft letter stressing the importance of postdoctoral mentoring that she and P. Shymanski had written, and were currently considering how best to present it to the faculty. Many postdocs are considered the sole possession of the faculty member who is paying for them off their own grant; this means there is often some resistance to change. Members of the group brought up the fact that postdocs do not see their appointment documents, and currently have no idea what's in their personal mentoring plans. Some questions were raised in the discussion: how should the mentoring plan be enforced? What mechanisms exist to check that mentoring plans are being followed? Can postdocs write their own mentoring plans, tailored to their individual goals? One suggestion was that faculty/departments would write mentoring plans for the initial appointment letter, but after that an "individual development plan" could be developed with input from both the postdoc and the faculty member involved as part of the re-appointment process. It would be good to encourage postdocs to think about their career goals early on in their postdoc. A subcommittee of the group, spearheaded by I. Hurley, will work on a model document, and bring it back to the group.

They will also look at the Progress Report Form for graduate students, and the award reports for fellowships.

Website: I. Hurley reported that the web site is up and running; she updates it once or twice a week to keep up with current events. She would like to add a reference to the old PDA and list the achievements that group accomplished, and then add an annual review of PDA achievements. Listing achievements could generate more interest in the group, since it will be perceived as a way of accomplishing goals. One more goal is to add a discussion board to the web site. M. Lindberg will talk to P. Shah about the costs of adding the discussion board.

Seminar Series: The seminar series has been going very well. The Kick-off Picnic had over 100 people attend, and the Halloween Social had about 50 people attending. The Careers seminars have generally drawn about 50 people each, which the Research seminars have drawn between 20-30.

Plans for winter are well under way (room bookings still to be confirmed). A group from Abbott Labs will present on Feb. 17th: should graduate students be invited? (yes) Should some invited guests do dinner afterwards with the Abbott presenters? Should there be a lunch? Perhaps Abbott would want to schedule interviews between lunch and the 4 pm seminar?

I. Hurley is also working on a Women in Science panel, and asked for suggestions of female faculty to invite. This will probably take place in May/June.

Orientation: T. Tennant was unable to attend due to an emergency situation in her lab. I. Hurley volunteered to help her out with finishing the Orientation packet. M. Lindberg agreed to call T. Tennant and find out the status of the packet and what needs to happen next. I. Hurley noted the handout from the NPA had suggestions for Orientation packets, and also a format for a postdoc handbook. N. Schwartz noted that she reviews at least one postdoc application per day, if not more – some of those are renewing appointments, however. There was again discussion about how to distribute the packet; some administrators are not known for a willingness to add to their workload. Perhaps the packet could also be in pdf format and e-mailed out to new postdocs.

The meeting closed with a discussion of the differences in benefits between postdoctoral fellows and postdoctoral scholars. Retirement benefits and health insurance are the main points of difference. N. Schwartz also advanced the idea of bringing Alyson Reed of the NPA in to talk to a broad audience of postdocs, similar to a program done by the University of Minnesota. Postdocs from other institutions could also be invited to participate. Perhaps in late spring?