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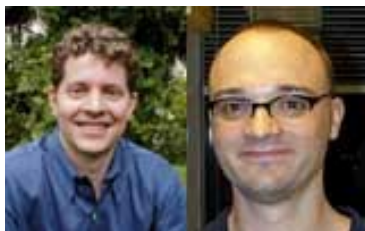
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## Surveying Postdocs: A Tale From the Trenches



BY ORFEU M. BUXTON AND STEPHEN GASIOR

BIOLOGICAL SCIENCES DIVISION, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO  
UNITED STATES

### Editor's Note

*This is the second in a three-part series about the organizing efforts of the Biological Sciences Division Postdoctoral Association (BSD-PDA) at the University of Chicago. In [the first article](#), Stephen Gasior wrote about his own reasons for seeking to establish the BSD-PDA. In this installment, we learn why the group believed it was necessary to survey postdocs and what they learned from the process of doing the survey. In the third article we will learn more about how the BSD-PDA used its survey findings to impact policies at the university.*

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You've heard good, bad, and ugly stories from postdocs as they navigate the murky area between the roles of student and junior faculty, between trainee and professional, and between apprentice and employee, often with the burdens of each role and the benefits of none. The daily experience of postdocs, whether at the University of Chicago or any other institution, is made even more complex by the reality that a postdoc's professional identity can shift from moment to moment as the postdoc interacts with the lab, the institution, and the scientific profession.

Information about postdoctoral experiences at a variety of institutions suggests that postdoc stories share many common themes. An authoritative compilation of postdoc trends has been published by the [National Academies of Science](#). The Postdoc Network has also documented several examples of "Does anyone have this situation?" (see sidebar) leading to a chorus of replies.

### Seeking a Mandate

Indeed, if only postdocs heard the stories of other postdocs at their own institution, they would see common patterns in the postdoctoral experience. A survey is one method for achieving a broader understanding of the postdoc condition. Our nascent [Postdoctoral Association](#) (PDA) in the Biological Sciences Division (BSD) at the University of Chicago formed around a core of regular seminars and workshops and e-mail communications. We embarked on a comprehensive survey as a first major initiative toward becoming an organization that could represent and address the needs of postdocs in our division.

The Postdoc Network has documented several themes that appear to be common to the postdoc experience. These stories serve to remind us we are not alone.

[Postdocs Are Not All Created Equal](#)  
[Solutions to Postdoc Parenting Problems](#)  
[Visas and the International Postdoc: Be Your Own Expert](#)

Anecdotes may get attention through emotion, but numbers make the case. We felt we needed broader guidance and affirmation to focus the limited resources and time of the PDA on an agenda essential to postdocs in the division.

### **Taking the First Steps**

Undertaking a comprehensive survey will be a time-consuming effort and thus requires a committed team with positions that will not be jeopardized by nonlab efforts. Our team included several "insiders," postdocs who had been grad students at the University of Chicago and, as a result, could provide the benefit of their experiences with administrative practices and institutional culture. These insiders also had allies that had been working on postdoc issues for many years. The team also included "outsiders," postdocs who had been postdocs at other institutions, who contributed an awareness of practices, ideas, and policies from further afield. These outsiders helped identify and question policies whose main justification seemed merely to be "that's the way we do things here."

Before we could initiate our work on a postdoc survey, we had one major challenge to overcome--a classic Catch-22. The effort required funding and support to get organized, but the institution was unwilling to supply that funding and support without evidence that they were needed. An institutional advocate who was already familiar with our concerns, as well as emerging national trends regarding postdocs, was necessary. In our case, the BSD Dean of Graduate Affairs provided mentoring, support, and that all-important seed money.

### **Begging the Question(s)**

Creating and implementing an effective postdoc survey can be difficult, but there is no need to reinvent the wheel. Many groups had already conducted similar surveys and they were happy to share their insights. Some examples that were particularly helpful were:

- [The Baylor College of Medicine postdoctoral survey](#)
- [The Stanford University postdocs survey results](#)
- [The Postdoctoral Scholars Association](#) at the University of California, Davis
- [The Brown University Postdoctoral Association](#)

We also found it helpful to draw upon friends and colleagues who knew HTML, as well as a social scientist who assisted us in question development and data analysis. The value of this individual's input cannot be understated--in hindsight, we would have benefited greatly from even more such expertise.

Throughout our survey project, we found it important to keep our goals in mind. Initially we were seeking a mandate to establish the BSD-PDA as the representative body of the division's postdocs. After reviewing other postdoc surveys, however, we decided to explore a broader range of topics, believing that this would help us to better understand the postdoc experience at the university. In a move that became very important later, we included questions that addressed a central issue for most postdocs: institutional status, including salary and benefits. As we'll explain in greater detail in the next article, when the results were tabulated, salary and benefits turned out to be surprisingly potent issues for BSD postdocs.

### **Designing the Survey**

In designing a survey, as in all research endeavors, forethought goes a long way. The implementation phase included writing questions, determining the mechanics of administering the survey, and assuring that the responses would provide useful data. One consideration was whether or not the survey should be Web-based. Sure, Web-based surveys reduce data entry, but they are time-consuming at the front-end. Although we had originally expected that we'd need to develop the HTML coding for the survey ourselves, we requested assistance from the division's Information Services (IS) unit. The IS staff helped us do the coding, made the survey available as a web site, and forwarded replies to the survey team. Without this assistance, the decision to use a web-based survey would have been more difficult.

Another important design consideration is the types of statistical tests that will be used on the data. For example, the answers to a few of our questions could not easily be converted to graphs and required more work than expected to interpret. Drawing on people experienced with surveys (e.g., graduate students and postdocs in biostatistics or psychology) is highly recommended at an early stage.

Our survey also benefited from pilot testing with respondents who had not been involved in creating it. We wish we had done more of this because it helped us to clarify the wording of questions and assess the time required to complete the whole survey. And because the survey was to be completed online, it was important to test the HTML coding to make sure there were no glitches, which of course there were. In fact, we had to do several practice rounds of testing before we could release the survey, a delay that we had not predicted.

### **Calling All Postdocs**

We found it necessary to put a great deal of effort into promoting the survey, urging postdocs to complete it, and disseminating the findings. The division office was unable to provide a complete list of postdoc email addresses--not a surprise based on the experience of other PDAs. Several departments, however, shared their

lists, and we were allowed to use the divisions' faculty list to help us generate a multidepartment distribution e-mail list. Flyers and word of mouth also encouraged participation. More details about our promotional efforts are available in the survey section of the BSD-PDA [Web site](#).

### **From Data Set to Insights**

Compiling the survey responses was the second most time-consuming part of the process. Some problems were not anticipated. For example, people didn't follow the survey format and provided responses in a manner different than we had expected (i.e., using narrative boxes to comment on multiple choice items). A manual review of the data set was therefore required so that minor errors could be corrected and adjustments made as the results were being compiled.

Six postdocs divided the survey's five sections and worked for 6 weeks to analyze the results and to complete a preliminary interpretation. Some preliminary findings necessitated further analyses. For example, responses varied greatly by gender so it became important to reconsider gender for all responses.

### **Telling Our Story**

The final and most rewarding part of the experience has come from the discussions the survey and its findings have engendered. We shared the survey process and preliminary results at the National Academies of Sciences Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy (COSEPUP) [Convocation on Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience](#) and at Next Wave's [Postdoc Network National Meeting](#). The results were also presented to members of the BSD-PDA at a recurring monthly workshop. These meetings provided an opportunity for postdocs and others outside of our institution to provide feedback and a broader perspective that have helped to focus our follow-up efforts.

Overall, we found that the survey was a worthwhile endeavor that has influenced the direction and goals of our nascent postdoc association, fulfilling the survey's primary goal. The survey findings have also given us insights into our membership through an aggregation of stories otherwise unavailable at our institution. Many secondary survey results were sufficiently compelling in content and breadth, even surprising, that we feel confident in presenting them to the Dean's office, departmental chairs, and elsewhere. The next article in this series will describe these initiatives to advocate for positive change.

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