



FINAL REPORT

## **Final Focus Group Report April 2007**

Compiled for the Division of Science Resources Statistics of the National Science Foundation on behalf of the Survey Sciences Group, LLC. Report was reviewed and edited by the Survey Sciences Group, LLC.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Division of Science Resources Statistics (SRS) of the National Science Foundation (NSF) is engaged in a multi-year project to determine the best strategy for collecting comprehensive information on postdocs. As part of this process, the Survey Sciences Group, LLC (SSG), conducted a series of focus groups with academic, government, and private-sector organizations that hire and train postdocs. The goal of the focus groups was to gain a better understanding of how institutions define postdocs and to provide some further insights into what types of postdoc data are collected, stored, and disseminated within individual institutions. The objective for the focus group project was to aid in the development of a more systematic and comprehensive methodology for collecting postdoc data and improving the quality of collected data.

## **METHOD**

Focus groups were initially planned for four sites across the US. The original areas selected were Washington DC, Boston MA, Atlanta GA, and San Francisco CA. These geographic areas were selected because they have high concentrations of large academic institutions, government labs, or private sector companies that employ postdocs. Our initial strategy was to conduct two groups at each of the four sites over a four week period. Delays in obtaining OMB approval caused considerable recruitment difficulties in many cities:

- The two groups originally scheduled for Washington DC were combined into a single larger group because of a lack of commitment of participation for the second scheduled group.
- The groups planned for Atlanta were not conducted due to logistical issues and a lack of adequate recruitment time.
- The Boston groups were conducted as planned, but the second session was only attended by one participant.
- In order to allow sufficient time for recruitment, the San Francisco groups were delayed an additional two weeks.

Each of the groups was conducted at a professional focus group facility that provided a conference room for participants and an attached observation room. All facilities included a

one-way mirror between rooms, and audio from the participant conference room into the observation room. Each session was also video- and audiotaped, and transcribed by Focus Vision (a company that specializes in focus group support services). Additionally, a live video feed was provided by Focus Vision to interested researchers at NSF and SSG. The moderator for each session was Lynn Hamilton of the Odum Institute (University of North Carolina). An SSG staff member was also physically present at each group session to assist and to serve as a liaison between the moderator and those observing remotely.

The moderator's guide was developed to provide a framework for the discussion, while encouraging knowledgeable participants to identify the salient issues for themselves. The focus group agenda questions covered three key areas. These topics were: 1) the definition of a postdoc, 2) postdoc data storage and maintenance, and 3) reporting of postdoc data. We followed a standard form across all the groups in which our moderator began by getting people to talk about their jobs and how they are involved with postdocs or postdocs data. The moderator's guide was slightly adjusted after the first group to allow more discussion on the definitions and also more flexibility in dealing with groups of a small number of participants. We included an option for participants to provide an organizational chart as part of the general discussion.

Before each group began, participants were asked to sign a consent and confidentiality form that was explained by the moderator. Participants were told they could refrain from answering specific questions or leave the group at any time. Each group began with participants introducing themselves and telling a little about where they worked and how they interact with postdocs or postdoc data. While naming specific organizations by name was optional, all participants seemed comfortable identifying their position and where they worked. Most also indicated how many postdocs they are responsible for, or are otherwise knowledgeable about.

After groups were conducted at each site, a preliminary report was prepared. These reports can be found in Appendices.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

Willing participants were identified by staff at SSG from publicly held lists, online research, and lists provided to SSG by NSF. Staff at SSG contacted interested individuals to

arrange for participation in one of the sessions. Our recruitment strategy included the following elements:

- Calls were made to organizations' central numbers
- A short telephone screener was used to ensure that the person had knowledge of postdoc issues and policies at their institution.
- We avoided contacting GSS respondents so that they would not be over-burdened.
- We used a network/snowball strategy to find other interested individuals

Every effort was made to contact both representatives from academics and non-academic institutions. However, getting non-academics to attend proved very difficult. Where originally academic and non-academic groups were going to be held separately at each site, it was decided after initial recruitment results that, it was decided that the groups would be combined to consist of both academic and non-academic members (including governmental agency representatives) when available, since such a small number of non-academics agreed to participate. A more detailed description of the composition of each group is given below.

### **Rockville Maryland**

The Rockville focus group consisted of five participants from a variety of institutions. There were two representatives from federal agencies, two industry representatives, and one academic participant. One participant was a postdoc from Georgetown who is also a member of the National Postdoc Association. Another was a staff researcher from a private company where he started his employment a postdoc—although his company does not currently employ any postdocs. The other industry representative was from a national professional organization that is a collaboration of research organizations; they are interested in postdocs but do not directly employ them. An administrative representative from NIH (National Institutes of Health) and a representative from the Department of Agriculture, a postdoc funder, also attended the Rockville session.

### **Boston Massachusetts**

The first Boston focus group consisted of six participants: five from Harvard University (or affiliated centers) and one from Boston University. Two of the Harvard representatives were from Harvard Medical School Centers. One was from the Provost office, which had recently taken an administrative role in overseeing postdocs institutionally at Harvard. The remaining two were from other departments at Harvard. The final member

of the group was a department administrator from Boston University. All of the Harvard people knew each other. The second Boston focus group consisted of only one participant from Harvard. This session was conducted as a one-on-one interview.

### **San Francisco**

The additional recruitment time prior to the San Francisco groups yielded higher participation rates. The first San Francisco focus group consisted of nine participants from a variety of institutions. There were three from private industry, five from academic institutions, and one from a government laboratory. There were representatives from the University of California system as well as Stanford University. A good representation of both human resource administrators and departmental administrators were present at the first group.

## **FINDINGS**

Several major themes emerged during the focus groups. Below is a list of the key findings from the focus group sessions. A more detailed discussion of these with specific examples is given under the sub-headings of the three areas of the moderator's guide.

### **Focus Groups: Key Themes**

- There is more variation than consistency within academic institutions regarding postdoc policies, the definition of a postdoc position, and record keeping.
- There are typically two definitions that exist for postdocs within institutions, a functional definition and a policy definition.
- New initiatives are developing in academic institutions to support and document postdocs.
- Postdoc data records don't usually contain important information such as foreign-degree status or funding source data.

### **Definition of a Postdoc**

After the introductions, our discussion moved towards defining a postdoc. The moderator used the flip chart to write down the elements of the definition supplied by group members. Most participants agreed that a postdoc is a position one obtains immediately after

receiving a PhD. Many institutions said a postdoc is someone who has received a PhD within the last five years whereas some had more specific criteria such as “fewer than five years relevant research experience”. Most of the participants commented that their institutions allowed for exceptions to these post-grad time line rules for a variety of reasons.

Some group members stated that postdoc positions at their institution were not part of the HR system and hence there is “no protection” in the hiring process or the compensation given to the postdocs. Some people commented that there is no formal process for hiring a postdoc so it remains in the hands of the Principle Investigator and often varies greatly between investigators and even within departments. One member of the Boston group kept bringing up that there is “no job description” for postdocs. However some of the others in the same group said they do indeed have job descriptions for postdocs—so we see again that this varies both within institutions and across institutions.

There was a general sentiment across groups that postdocs were “cheap labor.” They suggested that often researchers hire postdocs to avoid paying a researcher-level salary even though postdocs may be doing the exact same job. There was discussion during several of the groups regarding differences between postdocs and research associates, and it was agreed that it was often just a title and lower salary that distinguished between them.

One member of the Boston group started a discussion that described the definition as split into two parts: a process definition and a functional definition. It was agreed that Human Resources uses the process definition while other bodies, such as NIH and NSF, use a functional definition that includes terminology related to training and mentorship in a chosen career path.

Many of the participants also made comments about postdocs doing research and publishing papers. For example, one participant in Rockville commented, “It seems like an expectation that they are going to publish.” This same sentiment was brought up in later groups as well. One Boston participant commented that a postdoc is “a period of mentored training.” It was also brought up in Boston that medical postdocs are often of two different types: research and clinical. Only the research fellows are considered ‘research’ where the clinical positions are considered ‘fellows.’ The Boston representatives from the medical centers commented that the lines were grey and often hard to distinguish—and hence probably lead to misclassifications.

In all groups the idea of postdocs being temporary was common, but the length of tenure varied greatly between institutions. Some institutions had limited terms of as short as 6 months, while many allowed for the postdocs to continue for five years or more. It was brought up that NIH training grants come with their own term limitations (three years) and often it is the funding agencies that are interested in defining postdoc positions and tenure.

### **Management of Postdoc Data**

The overriding theme regarding data management was that it is improving within institutions, but a large amount of variability still exists. The newly emerging trend towards the development of postdoc offices is often a direct response to the difficulty of otherwise collecting postdoc data in a centralized location. A representative from Harvard talked about his new position and the role of the new office, not in dictating policy, but in helping to establish consistency within the institution. Organizations seem to be recognizing that postdoc counts coming from some departments in their organizations may not be consistent with others. The Harvard administrator commented, “one of my first tasks in the newly formed unit is to get better counts of postdocs.” The administrators often go to a department and then compare their numbers with the human resource data. Moreover, representatives from Harvard mentioned eleven to thirteen different HR codes for postdocs. They suggested that it was also easy to put people who aren’t postdocs into these category codes which could lead to overreporting. However, there was also a great deal of discussion among the Harvard representatives about the academic classifications. Participants stated that some postdocs never receive their academic classification and hence are not counted at all.

The representative from the HMS (Health and Medical Science at Harvard) remarked that she is developing a database of postdocs data and has been sharing ideas with others at Harvard. She commented about the database “this is a new and collaborative environment. Visit us in a few years and we’ll have much better data.” Other units at Harvard are also working on their own postdoc databases and learning from each other.

All of the Boston participants agreed that they currently go to the departments to obtain the most accurate information about postdocs. Even then, there is still a lot of manual data manipulation, and the departmental lists and HR lists generally don’t match up. The participants in the Rockville group thought that human resources had the best information, but some information could also be obtained through department heads.

The San Francisco groups had two different methods for collecting and managing postdoc data. In 2003, the University of California system was mandated to categorize postdocs into three specific job codes. Since the implementation of this policy (APM 390), postdocs in the University of California system are much easier to track and count. The University of California representatives said their data is getting better all the time because of the job code mandate.

At Stanford University, however, postdocs are considered students, so they are tracked in the student system and not in the general university human resource system. At Stanford, the postdocs are provided benefits, but under a special student benefits program. The Stanford representatives seemed very confident in their data and their systems for storing and tracking postdocs.

### **Reporting of Postdoc Data**

The reporting of postdocs data was clearly a concern for all the participants in the groups. Participants seemed to want to give accurate counts of postdocs but overall felt very pessimistic about the quality and comparability of such data as it is. While most participants had provided data to agencies such as NSF or NIH, they clearly indicated that it was 1) burdensome, and 2) not necessarily accurate. When asked about the barriers institutions face in reporting data, a Rockville participant commented “expense is the biggest thing; time, labor and deciding who is going to do it.” One private industry representative commented that before providing any data, the company needs to get approval from their corporate relations department—which might delay the turn-around time for reporting.

One of the biggest problems in collecting and reporting postdoc data is that not all organizations or departments within organizations keep the same information. While most indicated keeping basic demographic data, many seemed unsatisfied with the lack of data on things such as undergrad degrees and institutions attended. Participants from all groups also mentioned wanting more up-to-date data on publications past and present. They would also like to see more information such as marital status and number of dependents. It was brought up in several groups that information regarding salary would be helpful to have and report in order that comparisons across institutions could be conducted. In the Rockville group, a participant commented about what she would like to see collected, “What institutions they graduate from, what their degree was, and probably what their dissertation was.”

Most groups agreed that they would like to know what happens to the postdocs down the road. The private industry representative said that they did exit interviews with postdocs, but others admitted they have little contact with the postdocs after they are hired and usually no contact once a postdoc leaves the institution. In the first San Francisco group, a participant mentioned that they are trying to collect email addresses so they can track postdocs over time. San Francisco participants agreed that diversity was an area where more research and outreach was needed. It was discussed that many minority graduates are not familiar with postdocs programs and should be encouraged to learn more and seek out these opportunities.

In Boston, participants also commented that what data is collected is dependent on department. When asked how many postdocs they have, administrators have to respond “who do you want me to count?” Harvard is trying to determine who the best person within each department is. The Harvard administrator commented that “who is responsible for actual data collection” varies across institutions. He also said that he “doesn’t have a lot of confidence in HR postdoc data.” The Boston University representative said that for a recent National Research Council study she had to fit postdocs into departments and program categories as specified in the questionnaire, which was very difficult.

All participants agreed that there was a need to have consistent terms and provide enough time to respond to data requests. One Boston participant said “Give adequate time for people to complete data submission.” However, she added that the “data is dynamic” and it is also “hard to count because there is no cycle; they are consistently being hired and fired.”

Overall, participants appeared open to new data collection efforts by NSF and eager to assist in the development of such efforts. We should consider that this, however, is from individuals who had agreed to participate and assist already with the effort – our recruitment showed a lower level of willingness to help. However, most were reluctant to commit to being able to provide accurate and consistent data on a regular basis. Several participants from the groups said that they preferred electronic data submission over paper questionnaires and complained about difficulty with such forms. They want to be able to share the forms between appropriate staff members, to have adequate time to collect such data, and to have advance information about what they will be expected to collect and report.

## **SUMMARY**

Overall, in all five groups the discussion of postdocs was lively, serious and constructive. People provided relevant examples and listening to others with interest. Postdoc issues clearly mattered to participants, and most had a reasonably clear and principled idea about what data should be kept and reported. However, participants still had relatively vague ideas about a specific postdoc definition or procedures for collecting postdoc data.

It was clear from the groups that administrators are recognizing the lack of adequate record keeping and consistent reporting of postdoc data. Organizations are increasing their efforts to maintain and provide better data and also appear to be committed to improving the overall quality of the postdoc experience. Many academic institutions are opening postdoc offices and designating resources to help better understand and support postdocs. The environment within institutions is right for new and collaborative efforts in these areas and the National Science Foundation has a unique yet challenging opportunity to be a leader and contributor in these endeavors.