Coffee and Conversation:
A Day in the Life of a Post-Doc

*What is a postdoc?*

Postdoctoral scholars are people who have earned a PhD, but who wish to continue their training before entering a faculty position or other "regular" career. Most postdocs seek to enhance their skills in a particular domain and/or increase their knowledge of a particular topic. The typical duration of a postdoctoral position is 2-3 years. The vast majority of postdocs focus on training in research, although a few funding sources exist for postdoctoral training in teaching. Postdocs typically get paid better than graduate students, but not as well as people who have entered the "regular" workforce. Aside from these, there are few characteristics that are common to the postdoc experience.

*Why should I become a postdoc?*

One obvious reason for becoming a postdoc is to enhance your existing skill set and/or knowledgebase. Many postdoctoral scholars use their time to improve their research and publication record before going on the job market (and before the tenure-clock has officially started!). In addition, having postdoctoral training is viewed favorably by faculty search committees at many doctoral degree-granting institutions.

*What are the different kinds of postdoc positions?*

There are several types of post-doctoral positions, each of which is distinguished by its funding source.

Many postdoc positions are funded by a university faculty member’s grant. Faculty members may request funding to hire a postdoc when they initially apply for a grant, and some granting agencies allow for postdoc positions to be added while a project is underway. Scholars with this type of position are typically hired to do a particular task, such as lab management or data analysis, under the mentorship of a faculty member.

A few universities (e.g., University of California, University of Michigan, and University of Chicago) have university-wide competitions for individuals who wish to engage in postdoctoral work with a particular faculty member or within a specific department or research institute. In many cases, the goal of the host university is to recruit scholars who will eventually transition into faculty positions at that university.

Still other postdoc positions are funded through grants awarded to an academic department or research institute. (These research institutes may or may not be affiliated with a university.) The Center for Developmental Science at UNC-Chapel Hill, the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan, and the Rand Institute are a few examples of institutes that sometimes have funding for postdoctoral scholars in the social sciences. Some departments and institutes have specific projects lined up for postdoctoral scholars and/or formalized training programs designed to develop skills and knowledge in a particular area. In other cases, individuals will be asked to propose their own training plan as part of the application.
A number of funding sources permit scholars in the social sciences to design their own postdoctoral research experience and to bring their own funding to the host institution. A few examples of such funding sources are the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, the Spencer Foundation, and the Ford Foundation. Typically, applicants to these kinds of funding agencies will select a host institution and sponsoring faculty member well before submitting an application. Postdocs who bring their own funding to the host institution are often at an advantage because they can specify their own training program and goals and generally are not obligated to follow someone else’s prescribed training plan.

**How do I get a postdoc position?**

Unlike getting into graduate school, there is no single or clear pathway to getting a postdoc position. The best strategy for finding a postdoc position is to take an active approach. Regardless of the type of funding source you expect to use, you should plan on contacting potential faculty mentors well before any application deadlines that you’re planning to meet. Application deadlines tend to range from November to April, so it’s definitely a good idea to get started early.

A good first step in finding a postdoc position is to talk to your graduate school mentors to find out if they know of a suitable mentor who has postdoc funding available. If you already have a mentor in mind, contact that person directly to find out if they already have postdoc funding available or if they would be willing to sponsor you if you brought your own funding from a source like NIH or NSF. Although many are not formally announced (or the announcements are hard to find!), the “Announcements” and “Jobs” sections of websites for professional organizations like SRA, the Society for Research in Child Development, and the American Educational Research Association sometimes have information about postdoctoral positions and training programs. The “Jobs” section of the online version of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is another good place to look for postdoc positions. Also, be sure to scour the websites of research institutes and academic departments that match your interests; those with funding for postdocs or postdoctoral training programs often post this information on the web.

**What is a day in the life of a postdoc like?**

There are probably as many answers to this question as there are postdocs! How a postdoc spends a typical day should depend largely on his or her training goals. Depending on those goals, postdocs may spend time collecting or analyzing data, auditing courses, reading, and writing manuscripts for publication. Of course, postdocs who are funded through a faculty member’s grant will be expected to perform the tasks for which they were hired (e.g., lab management, data analysis); ideally, these tasks will be consistent with the postdoc’s training goals.

With no courses to teach or take, and no faculty responsibilities, many postdocs find that they have a great deal of unstructured time. Therefore, one of the major challenges of the postdoc training period is learning how to be self-motivated and to structure time so that training goals are accomplished. When possible, networking with other postdocs (for instance through the formation of writing groups and other collaborative relationships) can help to add structure and accountability to daily routines.

This handout was prepared by Dana Wood (University of California at Los Angeles) for the SRA 2010 Biennial Meeting.