

Postdoctoral Affairs Offices: Too Much To Do, Too Little Institutional Support

Dr. Sylvia L. Mendez, University of Kentucky

Dr. Sylvia Mendez is a Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership Studies at the University of Kentucky. She earned a PhD in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies from the University of Kansas, a MS in Student Affairs in Higher Education from Colorado State University, and a BA in Economics from Washington State University. Dr. Mendez is engaged in several National Science Foundation-sponsored collaborative research projects focused on broadening participation in STEM academia. Her research centers on the creation of optimal higher education policies and practices that advance faculty careers and student success, as well as the schooling experiences of Mexican-descent youth in the mid-20th century.

Jennifer Tygret

Dr. Comas Lamar Haynes, Georgia Tech Research Institute

Comas Lamar Haynes is a Principal Research Engineer / faculty member of the Georgia Tech Research Institute and Joint Faculty Appointee at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory. His research includes modeling steady state and transient behavior of advanced en

Dr. Canek Moises Luna Phillips, Rice University

Dr. Canek Phillips is a Research Scientist at in the George R. Brown School of Engineering at Rice University where his research interests touch broadly on efforts to promote greater equity for historically excluded groups in engineering.

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Introduction

The purpose of this extended abstract roundtable session is to explore the viewpoints of college and university postdoctoral affairs office directors on the ways in which they seek to support postdoctoral scholars. The National Postdoctoral Association (NPA, 2023) provides a toolkit for postdoctoral affairs offices that includes guidance on inclusive and effective policies and programs, such as providing an orientation to welcome new postdoctoral scholars, establishing communication channels to share institutional benefits and policies, and professional development and career counseling services to offer. However, the literature suggests that little of this programming is occurring (Burke et al., 2019; Van Benthem et al., 2020). Proudfoot and Hoffer (2016) argue that a need exists for a comprehensive strategy to properly support, inspire, and equip postdoctoral scholars for institutional and career success, which should begin with postdoctoral affairs offices. Yet, postdoctoral affairs offices notoriously operate with limited resources (Costello, 2018). Thus, these offices may represent an institutional structure that fails to properly support postdoctoral scholars in their institutions or in their next career step. This is a critical avenue to investigate because it raises the voices of postdoctoral affairs office directors; much of the research in this vein relies on postdoctoral scholar surveys and author commentaries.

Methods

An instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) investigates how postdoctoral affairs office directors implement best practices from the NPA to support postdoctoral scholars at their institutions. Twenty directors from public and private colleges and universities across the US were recruited for this study via email. Most directors were in part-time staff positions, and some held dual faculty roles. The number of postdoctoral scholars working at these institutions ranged from 400 to 1000. Nearly all the postdoctoral scholars were in STEM fields, and half were from abroad. The 20 interviews were analyzed deductively (Stake, 1995) using perceived behavioral control (PBC; Ajzen, 2002). This conceptual framework focuses on one's ability to perform a particular behavior. It includes two distinct components: perceived self-efficacy (ease or difficulty of performing a behavior) and controllability (presence of adequate resources and ability to control the barriers in performing the behavior) (Ajzen, 2002; Hardin-Fanning & Ricks, 2017). PBC articulates the theoretical propositions needed to understand postdoctoral office directors' perceptions of their self-efficacy and controllability in supporting postdoctoral scholars. This understanding may identify pragmatic issues of concern and guide institutional efforts to improve postdoctoral scholar experiences and career trajectories. Data analysis findings revealed three themes regarding postdoctoral affairs offices' implementation of best practices from the NPA: (1) firm commitment to utilizing NPA best practices; (2) insufficient staff and authority; and (3) overreliance on postdoctoral scholars to assist office efforts.

Findings

Theme 1: Firm Commitment to Utilizing NPA Best Practices. All participants were well aware of the NPA best practices and available resources. All had systematic ways to

communicate with postdoctoral scholars through listservs, social media platforms, and newsletters to share institutional policies, professional development opportunities, and services provided by allied offices. However, none felt confident they were capturing the entire population because postdoctoral scholars could be defined differently based on their hiring. For example, if they were funded through a grant, they could be considered contract employees and not receive a full benefits package, versus if hired through an academic unit, they could be coded as faculty members and receive full benefits as any other institutional employee.

Nearly all spoke of hosting orientation programs, a postdoctoral handbook, and a postdoctoral association, but few administered an annual survey or conducted exit interviews—all considered best practices by the NPA. Participants spoke about relying on NPA resources “not to reinvent the wheel.” One participant from an Ivy League institution noted that NPA offers “a handbook on how to do a National Postdoc Appreciation Week, as well as how to start a postdoc association.” Most spoke of the NPA annual conference as a great networking opportunity. One participant from a large public institution said: “We just got back from our National Postdoctoral Association meeting...it’s a really great support network. I always learn a lot from my peers and colleagues, so I feel like that’s more my team than the people at my own university.”

Theme 2: Insufficient Staff and Authority. All participants shared that they lack the staff and authority to support postdoctoral scholars effectively. As one participant from a large public institution described, she has an “absurdly small budget,” which limits her ability to provide the professional support she desires and knows postdoctoral scholars would benefit from. Most are a staff of one, so managing an office serving hundreds means they are stretched thin and working closely with allied offices for programming. One participant from a large public institution indicated, “Having more people that are able to put 100% effort into postdoc success, whether it’s professional development, career counseling, teaching...that’s where I just really make sure I partner with others, and make sure those lines are open for the postdocs.” Several spoke of needing to be reactive rather than proactive because they do not have the discretionary time to add more to their plates. One participant from a large public institution shared, “I just try to listen to where the needs are, and I don’t usually act without having someone ask for it first.”

A common area the participants spoke of desiring to elevate was the training and support of postdoctoral scholar advisors. Priorities included formalized training on best practices in mentoring, creating actionable individualized development plans (IDPs), and implementing advisor-advisee career planning. One participant from a large public institution noted he would like to provide “a one-hour talk and overview of mentoring and then do breakouts and follow-up workshops to have for faculty and postdocs...and if we were able to enforce it, that would be great.” So not only did the participants see this as an area of need, but they also felt stifled in pursuing these efforts since they did not have the authority to mandate better support of postdoctoral scholars. Several spoke of encouraging their postdoctoral advisors to undergo mentor training through the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER), but again, they were disappointed to share that they could not require it. One participant from an Ivy League institution said, without a mandate, “The people who really care about doing this well and are probably doing it quite well are the ones who go to the optional training, and then the people who need it the most don’t.”

Theme 3: Overreliance on Postdoctoral Scholars to Assist Office Efforts. All participants indicated that their offices could not run effectively without postdoctoral scholars leading some of the efforts. This work occurs primarily through postdoctoral associations. While most volunteer their time, a few offices provide modest stipends for association leadership positions. These associations advocate for postdoctoral needs, propose workshop topics, and provide community-building activities. One participant from a small public institution noted that a newly formed postdoctoral association brought awareness of inequities in postdoctoral scholars' benefit packages. He said, "It was actually a disincentive for people to get fellowships because the benefits weren't as good because you're not technically an employee...the association pushed the central administration to do something about the benefits." Another participant from a small public institution noted that "before we had the association, I don't think they did very much [social activities]...and when do some of those things, I try to provide a small budget."

While most participants were proud to share the programming offered by the postdoctoral association, such as celebrating National Postdoctoral Association Week or offering a Postdoctoral Research Conference, they were concerned about the overreliance on postdoctoral scholars' time. A participant from a large public institution shared, "Most of them are volunteering in part because they feel like we need something here, and then also, I think they're like, 'Oh, well, this is an opportunity for me to practice some of the skills that maybe I feel like I need professionally.'" All participants noted deep gratitude for postdoctoral scholars being thought partners and leading some of the activities, but there were concerns about this strategy in the long run. One participant from a large public institution stated, "It's working for us right now. I don't know how sustainable it is over time."

Implications

The implications of this study for higher education institutions abound. First, it is telling that the self-efficacy of postdoctoral office directors is high despite their controllability being low. Properly supporting the staff in these offices is imperative to ensure they experience success and feel efficacious in their efforts to serve postdoctoral scholars. Recognition for their efforts must be institutionalized as they are the unsung heroes of the support structure for postdoctoral scholars. Institutions also must increase resources to aid in the success of these offices, such as additional staff or budget, which would take some of the burden off postdoctoral scholars to lead office efforts. Mandating the use of NPA best practices would reinforce the commitment institutions must make to the postdoctoral training experience, such as requiring or even incentivizing the training of postdoctoral advisors. Also, ensuring postdoctoral scholars complete IDPs would bring their personal and professional goals and needs to the forefront and provide insight into programming the postdoctoral office may need or want to offer.

Conclusion

This instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) underpinned by PBC (Ajzen, 2002) provides a deeper understanding of the viewpoints of college and university postdoctoral affairs office directors on how they seek to support postdoctoral scholars at their institutions. Data analysis of the interviews resulted in three main themes: (1) firm commitment to utilizing NPA best practices; (2) insufficient staff and authority; and (3) overreliance on postdoctoral scholars to assist office

efforts. These findings suggest that colleges and universities invest too little in postdoctoral affairs offices, which mirrors the literature (Burke et al., 2019; Van Benthem et al., 2020). While postdoctoral affairs office directors' perceived self-efficacy is high, they share little controllability over supporting postdoctoral scholars effectively. While postdoctoral scholars play a large role in the research arm of higher education institutions (National Institute of Health Advisory Committee, 2023), their professional and personal needs are largely unfulfilled through the existing institutional structure of postdoctoral affairs offices. This research calls for re-envisioning such structures and renewing a pledge to enhance the postdoctoral training environment to best support postdoctoral scholars, their career trajectories, and the staff who serve them.

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