

The Positive Impact of Benefit Changes for Postdoctoral Researchers at Princeton University: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

Postdoctoral researchers are most commonly supported by sponsored research projects, institutional funding, external fellowship funds, or training grants. Although it is likely that those supported by any of these sources have similar levels of professional responsibility, in actuality the benefits packages for postdoctoral researchers on fellowships and training grants differ from those received by postdocs receiving support through sponsored project funding.

For many years, Princeton University has recognized that the loss of benefits associated with the award of an external postdoctoral fellowship is unfair and serves to discourage postdoctoral researchers from pursuing these awards. However, it also has been recognized that individual fellowships encourage independence early in postdoctoral researchers' careers and permit them to pursue their research and training goals, and therefore should be encouraged.

This paper contains a description of the steps taken by Princeton University to equalize the benefits packages provided to all postdoctoral fellows, regardless of their type of support. By offering comparable benefits, Princeton is able to continue to attract the highest level of postdoctoral researchers while supporting their training mission as well as their participation in sponsored research.

Postdoctoral researchers surveyed at Princeton were satisfied with the improvement and felt that Princeton's plan came very close to equalizing the benefits between those on fellowships or training grants and those supported via sponsored project funds. Of those surveyed, 58% reported

that the wage supplement from the University (equal to 10% of their fellowship stipend) is equal to or greater than the value of the 9.3% retirement contribution made by the university on behalf of employees. A total of 62.5% of the postdocs surveyed reported that the improvement in the benefit package currently made available to those receiving external fellowships would positively impact their decision to come to Princeton as opposed to another comparable institution that did not offer an equitable benefit package to postdocs receiving external fellowships.

Postdoctoral researchers are most commonly supported by sponsored research projects, institutional funding, external fellowship funds, or training grants. Although it is likely that those supported by any of these sources have similar levels of professional responsibility, in actuality the benefits packages for postdoctoral researchers on fellowships and training grants differ from those received by postdocs receiving support through sponsored project funding.

Sponsoring agencies offer fellowships and training grants in order to advance the education or training of fellows. Recipients receive predetermined stipends intended to provide a living allowance—the cost of benefits is not covered by the fellowship. In most cases federal, state, and local taxes are not withheld.

Unlike fellowships and training grants, sponsored research funding is awarded to an institution based on a project budget. It is intended to cover the costs of the project and provides salary and benefits for the postdoctoral researcher in support of that effort. The postdoc has an employer-employee relationship with the institution.

Within the two major funding agencies, the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and across all disciplines, most postdoctoral researchers are supported by research grants (National Academy of Sciences, 2000).

Motivated by limited funding sources as well as the prestige that accompanies external fellowships, faculty advisors encourage postdoctoral researchers to pursue external fellowships. The receipt of fellowships encourages independence early in postdocs' careers and permits them to pursue their research and training goals. Often a postdoc supported by a competitive individual fellowship has more initial flexibility in choosing a program (National Academy of Sciences, 2000).

Although successfully obtaining external funding is advantageous and often a necessary step in a postdoctoral researcher's professional advancement, it generally results in a change in rank that causes him or her to be ineligible to receive the same status and benefits enjoyed by institutional employees. In a sense, those who successfully obtain their own external funding are in actuality being penalized for this very accomplishment. The impact is especially severe at Princeton University, where postdocs supported by project grants are eligible for the full suite of employee benefits, including the standard retirement plans. According to a national survey of postdoctoral researchers' working conditions, most respondents receive satisfactory medical coverage, but the majority do not receive dental, vision, retirement, disability, or life insurance (Nally, 2002). In a survey of institutions, more than one-third reported that the type of medical benefit available is dependent on the source of the postdoc's funding (National Academy of Sciences, 2000).

In another survey, the National Postdoctoral Association polled 21 institutions (National Postdoctoral Association, n.d.) about benefits offered to postdoctoral researchers in the sciences. In this instance, externally funded fellows are classified as trainees while those funded and paid through their institution are classified as employees. Table 1 illustrates the favorable benefits available to postdoctoral researchers classified as employees. Although the results indicate that a greater number of institutions are providing favorable benefits to externally funded fellows with respect to several select benefits (maternity leave, child care), fewer institutions are providing comparable health insurance benefits, retirement benefits, equal time off, or equitable training allowance to externally funded fellows.

Table 1. Prevalence of Benefits Provided to Postdoctoral Basic Science Fellows

Benefit	All	Classified as Trainees (a)	Classified as Employees
Health insurance	100%	100%	100%
Same health insurance benefits provided to other non-supervisory employees in the organization	90%	88%	92%
Eligible for the same paid time off benefits provided to other non-supervisory employees in the organization	60%	38%	75%
Contribute to a retirement plan	67%	56%	75%
Training allowance	40%	38%	42%
Maximum training allowance amount per fellow, per year	Avg. = \$1,175 (b)	Avg. = \$705 (c)	Avg. = \$1,600 (d)
Paid maternity leave, other than accumulated sick and/or vacation time	42%	63%	27%
Subsidization for child care costs	24%	22%	25%
Average child care subsidy per fellow, per year	isd	isd	isd
On-site child care facility available	38%	56%	25%

Notes: isd = insufficient data

- (a) The benefits statistics reported for “trainees” include only fellows who are classified as “trainees” for employment purposes and are also eligible for benefits based on funding source
- (b) 50% of organizations providing a training allowance report there is no maximum amount
- (c) 33% of organizations providing a training allowance report there is no maximum amount
- (d) 60% of organizations providing a training allowance report there is no maximum amount

The inequities that arise from this differential treatment are especially pronounced in the sciences, where traineeships are most common. For example, in the life sciences, the NIH supports about 7,000 postdocs via NRSA traineeships and about 6,500 through research grants (National Academy of Sciences, 2000). Through the years, postdoctoral fellows as well as their faculty mentors and sponsoring departments have expressed concerns about the inequalities.

Princeton University, along with other colleges and universities, has been concerned for many years about this paradoxical problem facing postdoctoral fellows receiving external funding. Committed to continuing to attract the highest level of postdoctoral researchers and supporting their training as well as their participation in sponsored research, the university examined the possibility of eliminating the disparity by treating all non-visiting postdoctoral researchers as employees.

Early in AY2005–2006, the Princeton University Research Board (URB) formed a committee charged with developing a solution that would provide more equitable benefits to postdoctoral researchers supported by training grants and external fellowships within the constraints imposed by the funding agencies. The committee's proposal received the support of the President, the Provost, the Office of the General Counsel, and the Dean of the Faculty.

In September 2006 the Dean of the Faculty announced changes to the existing postdoctoral ranks. The rank of Visiting Research Fellow (VRF), which covered all postdocs receiving external fellowships, was replaced with the new Postdoctoral Research Fellow (PDRF) rank with a benefits package closely resembling that received by employees.

Postdoctoral researchers in the new PDRF rank receive a supplement from the university totaling 10% of their fellowship stipend, which they are strongly urged to contribute to the Princeton Group Supplemental Retirement Annuity Plan or an equivalent supplemental retirement account. In addition, PDRFs are now eligible for nearly all of the same benefits afforded to employees, including health care, vision care, dental care, basic life insurance, supplemental life insurance, educational assistance, faculty and staff assistance and work/life programs, and long-term care. Postdoctoral researchers surveyed at Princeton reported that after the health care plan, the vision care plan, dental care plan, wage supplement, and work/life programs were the most important benefits available to them.

According to the aforementioned survey, Princeton postdocs were satisfied with the improvement and felt that Princeton's plan came very close to equalizing the benefits between those on fellowships or training grants and those supported via sponsored project funds. Of those surveyed, 58% reported that the 10% wage supplement from the University is equal to or greater than the value of the 9.3% retirement contribution made by the university on behalf of employees. A total of 62.5% of the postdocs surveyed reported that the improvement in the benefit package currently made available to those receiving external fellowships would positively impact their decision to come to Princeton as opposed to another comparable institution that did not offer an equitable benefit package to postdocs receiving external fellowships.

As was the case before the enhanced benefits were introduced, some exceptions exist for J-1 Visa holders. Postdoctoral researchers from other institutions spending brief periods working on the Princeton campus or those supported by grants sponsored and/or administered by other institutions are appointed as Visiting Postdoctoral Research Associates (VPDRA) and are not eligible for the Princeton benefits package (Princeton University, 2006).

Princeton is neither the first nor the only institution to acknowledge this type of inequality by instituting a policy change to provide parity in benefits between postdoctoral researchers receiving external funding and those supported by sponsored research or institutional funding.

For example, in July 2003, postdoctoral fellows at the Harvard Graduate School of Education receiving external fellowships in the form of a stipend through Harvard's payroll became eligible for a more equitable employee benefit package (S. Liberman, personal communication, April 23, 2007). In January 2004, the University of Chicago, Biological Sciences Division (BSD) and Physical Sciences Division (PSD), began to provide a supplement to assist in the purchase of health coverage and other optional coverages, including dental, life, and long-term disability coverage not otherwise provided to recipients of external fellowships (M. Gonzalez, personal communication, April 12, 2007).

The changes that Princeton has instituted reflect its belief that equalizing benefits among all postdoctoral researchers is advantageous not only to postdocs, but also to their faculty advisors and to the institution. The belief that all postdocs are created equal permits the institution to attract, retain and develop the most talented and promising individuals.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Prior to working at Princeton University, she held positions in the corporate finance sector, most recently at Merrill Lynch in project management. She has a BA from the State University of New

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