

Postdoctoral Working Group Report

Overview

This committee was charged with examining the problems encountered by women postdoctoral fellows and with proposing actions that would alleviate these problems. Postdoctoral fellows include the most highly selected and able individuals in the academic pipeline, and postdoctoral positions are the bridge between graduate student training and independent academic (and other high-level technical) positions in many fields. Postdocs are the “forgotten” of the university system: they are neither students nor staff; they live mired in bureaucratic inconsistency; they receive low salaries, and do not have the option of trading money for help and time; and they have no protection from incompetent or exploitive supervisors.

Over and above the problems common to all postdoctoral students, female postdocs have (or anticipate) the additional burdens of childcare (and often of care for aging family members), and of household management. These difficulties are often so onerous that talented women—individuals with the potential to make enormous contributions to science and society—conclude that it simply isn’t worth the effort, and choose to follow paths that do not demand that they deal with them. Disappointingly, despite all efforts to remove discriminatory bias there remains a tendency for women to be undervalued compared to men in equivalent positions.

Harvard, through its indifference to the problems of postdoctoral students as a group, and to the particular problems of women postdoctoral students, actively contributes to the loss of women from the pipeline feeding high-level scientific and technical positions in university, industry, and government.

We propose that Harvard invest resources in three strategic areas: help for women attempting to balance work and family commitments; support for science and engineering departments to identify and remove sources of bias; and an institutional commitment to improve the effectiveness of the postdoctoral training experience.

Recommendations

1. Work/family balance

1A. Childcare. Childcare in the greater Boston area is both scarce and prohibitively expensive for families living on postdoc-level salaries. On-site childcare is unavailable in the Longwood Medical Area and insufficient in Cambridge. For women with children, affordable childcare is overwhelmingly the single most important factor that could improve their postdoctoral experience. Other institutions have interpreted “affordable” to mean that a family should not have to spend more than 14% of their gross income on childcare.

- **Harvard must find a way to offer affordable childcare and after-school care.**

Short-term proposal:

Expand childcare scholarships currently administered through the Office of Work, Life and Family at FAS and the HMS/HSDM Childcare Scholarship Program.

Long-term goals:

More on-site childcare centers in Cambridge
On-site childcare centers at Longwood
Provide on-site care during evenings and weekends
Subsidize afterschool care
Provide emergency care (expand Parents in a Pinch program)

1B. Flexibility in career path. Women take a disproportionate share of the responsibilities of childcare and of elder care, which can lead to a requirement for an extension of the postdoctoral training period or a need to re-enter the workforce after a gap. Very few options exist for support for such transitions. Without such support, promising women are lost from the academic career track forever.

• Harvard should offer fifty, one to two year fellowships (\$50,000 per year) to support the salary of a postdoctoral fellow in transition in one of two categories to be administered by Radcliffe.

Competitive funding for a senior postdoctoral fellow whose fellowship has run out (e.g. the end of a 3 year fellowship). There should be very high standards for receiving these fellowships (i.e. a postdoc who is very competitive for an academic position but wants a bit more time to finish a project and/or apply for faculty positions).

Transitional funding for women who have temporarily left the academic track. This would provide an opportunity to retrain and reestablish a publication record. Two years of salary for a second postdoctoral fellowship. Radcliffe would consider providing these postdocs with a Radcliffe association if desired.

• Grants to fund novel ideas. Harvard should offer one to three, three-year fellowships at approximately \$50,000 each, to encourage the development of new solutions to the work/family challenge (e.g. job sharing).

1C. Minimum salary and leave guidelines. Because women are disproportionately affected by the financial problems of childcare, providing a “floor” in compensation would disproportionately benefit women. In some cases postdoctoral fellows are receiving as little as 80% of the NIH-recommended stipend (in Boston, a particularly expensive metropolitan area). No University policy on maternity leave exists, leaving postdocs to negotiate individually with their Principal Investigator. This can lead to unacceptable pressure on a postdoc to return to work very early.

- **Harvard should mandate a minimum salary level for postdoctoral fellows and offer salary support for a three-month maternity leave.**

2. Addressing sources of bias.

At the Postdoc Fora on Women in Science and Engineering^{*}, the Committee heard feelings of anger and frustration. Because there is neither institutional organization nor oversight of their training, postdoctoral fellows are both more isolated than graduate students and more vulnerable to the whims of their advisors. Many women commented that their lives are made more difficult by overt or unconscious sexism. Women reported feeling powerless to address such attitudes, and were fearful of programs being too obviously targeted at increasing the number of women; such programs open up the recipient to the accusation that she is only at Harvard because she's female. The strength of feelings reported was remarkable, and it is clear that departments need support and advice from experienced professionals on how to address these continuing problems. It is also clear that the effort to support change must be long-term.

- **Harvard should establish an office to provide on-going assessment of areas for improvement in every relevant Department.** The office could be modeled after the Wisconsin Women in Science and Engineering Leadership Institute (WISELI) (<http://wiseli.engr.wisc.edu/>) and should report to the Board of Overseers. It must be proactive, visible and powerful.

- **Harvard should provide incentives for Departments to make serious efforts to improve.** Each Department should be required to submit an annual plan for improvement in areas targeted by the office described above. Significant additions to the Department budget (we suggest at least \$250,000) should be given to Departments that achieve goals.

3. Improving the effectiveness of the postdoctoral training experience.

The postdoctoral years are the final and most critical period of training for an academic scientist. A survey of 7600 postdocs conducted by the scientific society Sigma Xi and released this week (sigmaxi.org) showed that a well-structured environment including a postdoc office and formal review of postdoc performance pays off in greater productivity. The training environment offered by Harvard University is uneven at best. Women suffer disproportionately from inadequate advice, mentoring and encouragement.

3A. Providing better access to information and resources. Some of the resources postdocs need are already in place at Harvard, but inaccessible (e.g. postdocs are not allowed to use the Bok Center and the FAS career counseling office). Others (e.g. training in how to conduct an academic job search and grant writing) need to be

^{*} The Postdoc Fora on Women in Science and Engineering were open sessions to which all postdocs were invited to brainstorm about what Harvard could do to improve the postdoc experience at Harvard and thus help to increase the number of women and minorities in science.

developed and could borrow from effective booklets and workshops established by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute and The Burroughs Wellcome Trust.

- **Harvard should provide an office dedicated to the concerns of postdocs on the FAS campus, and expand the existing office on the HMS campus.** These offices will collaborate to collect information useful to postdocs and develop new resources.

- **Harvard should build on the existing structure of the Radcliffe Institute wherever possible to provide specific programs for mentoring and supporting women postdoctoral fellows.**

3B. Supporting career development for exceptional female postdocs. Harvard's postdoc population includes the best of the best. It is imperative that we give these exceptional young scientists the best possible chance to succeed. These would be very competitive, prestigious fellowships, given to those postdocs who are the primary caregiver and show the most promise (i.e. postdocs of the caliber that we might consider for an internal promotion to faculty). Many of our trainees would benefit immensely from flexible support, in addition to outside fellowships, to be used for purposes such as hiring a technician, funding full-time child care for a project that requires substantial travel, supplemental salary, etc.

- **Harvard should support 25 prestigious Career Development Awards, each for a 3-year term, at the level of \$70,000 per year.** These funds should be unrestricted. The awards should be administered through Radcliffe. One could apply for this grant at any point, with the money available after one becomes pregnant.

Notes on the target population: There are approximately 1500 postdoctoral fellows at FAS, HMS and HSPH of whom less than half are women. There are many more postdoctoral fellows (approximately 3400) who are hospital affiliated. This task force did not address the problems faced by hospital-based postdoctoral fellows. We recommend that a task force be formed to address this group.