

SUMMARY OF ISSUES
Prepared by the
National Postdoctoral Association (NPA)

1. Fair Compensation for Postdoctoral Researchers

For some time, the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) has been concerned about the low level of stipends for postdoctoral fellows supported under the Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award (NRSA). The commitment of the Obama administration to support scientific research has already presented opportunities to increase these stipends, as evidenced by the 1% increase in the NRSA stipends in 2009.

We at the NPA appreciated the 2009 stipend increase as a token of good faith that the NIH intends to fulfill its 2001 pledge to (1) increase initial stipends to \$45,000 and (2) provide automatic cost-of-living increases each year thereafter to keep pace with inflation. **We also recognize that several years of flat funding in the past decade have hindered the NIH from steadily increasing these stipends.** Accordingly, the NPA has begun to advocate to Congress, through support of a national advocacy organization and our own grassroots efforts, to increase overall funding for the NIH. **Currently, we are asking the Senate to increase the NIH appropriation and adopt the language in the House Report 111-220 for H.R. 3293 to increase research training stipends by 2% for FY 2010.** We will continue such advocacy efforts for increased NIH funding in the coming years.

The NPA now urges the NIH to take more financially significant steps to increase the NRSA stipends. We recommend that the NIH:

- Increase NRSA stipends by 4% to 5% in FY 2011.
- Review the base stipend amount in terms of what it should be today, eight years after the pledge was made.
- Consider geographic rate adjustments for postdoctoral scholars located in regions with higher costs of living.

2. Training for Postdoctoral Researchers

As noted during the September 9 Town Hall meeting, there is a need for better training of scientists. The NIH and NSF both define a “postdoc” as a temporary training position, and NIH funds are already used for trainee and fellowship salaries. **Thus, we recommend that the NIH:**

- Include mentoring provisions for postdoctoral scholars on NIH research grants, requiring mentoring plans as part of proposals.
 - This requirement need not be onerous, as both the NIH Office of Extramural Research and the NIH Office of Intramural Training and Education provide resources and information that could be used in mentoring plans. The NPA and other associations and societies also provide resources.
- Provide training supplements for research awards.
- Require mid-award evaluation surveys to be completed and submitted by postdoctoral trainees being paid with NIH funds.
 - Such surveys would provide data on the effectiveness of postdoctoral training that could be used to evaluate programs/mentors when reviewing future grant proposals containing trainee salaries.
 - Mid-award evaluations of training programs could provide more reliable data than entry/exit interviews. (Our conversations with postdoctoral researchers

suggest that, upon entry, the postdoctoral scholar does not know enough to answer the questions, and upon exit, the postdoctoral scholar no longer has the motivation to respond in a meaningful way.)

- Mandate the development of postdoctoral offices at institutions receiving NIH training awards, which will provide support to both PIs and postdoctoral scholars and so facilitate better outcomes.

3. Transition and Time to Independent Research

The NPA is deeply concerned about the ever increasing delay between completion of training (i.e., completion of a Ph.D.) and acquisition of independent positions. A causative factor of this problem may be the continued increase in the time it takes for new investigators to secure independent funding. For example, the average age at which researchers are awarded their first NIH R01 grant has increased nearly 10 years since 1970. As a result, postdoctoral researchers are often unable to move into independent positions due to lack of funding for those positions. Additional funding is needed for early career scientists to make the transition from postdoctoral fellow to principle investigator. **We recommend that the NIH:**

- Increase the number of Pathway to Independence (K99-R00) Awards given each year (currently, only 150 to 200 of these awards are given per year).
- Consider ways to improve the effectiveness of the K99 awards.
 - Allow budget line items for covering the costs of professional development courses on managing a lab, personnel, and money successfully, writing grants and attaining funding, etc.
- Create/award more small independent research grants for which only postdoctoral researchers (as PIs) would be eligible and thus encourage institutions to support postdoctoral researchers as PIs because it would increase funding for their labs.
 - Our conversations with some postdoctoral researchers indicate that (1) some institutions will not allow postdoctoral researchers to apply for grants as PIs and (2) it is often difficult to get faculty mentors to agree to allow a postdoctoral scholar to work and publish on projects independently as well as retain supplies—reagents, notebooks, etc.—necessary for continuing those projects in the independent phase of the award.

4. Gathering Data about Postdoctoral Researchers

Currently, there is a lack of significant data representing the national postdoctoral community. For example, we can only estimate the number of postdoctoral scholars in the United States. We applaud the steps that NIH is taking to determine the numbers of postdoctoral researchers who are supported by NIH research funds. Such data are important in order to predict the future needs of the U.S. research enterprise and to understand better the current issues surrounding postdoctoral researchers.

In another approach to determine the number of postdoctoral researchers in the United States, the National Science Foundation (NSF) is in the testing phase of its Postdoc Survey Project (<http://postdocstudy.net>) and hopes to conduct its first national survey of postdoctoral scholars within a year or two. **We recommend that the NIH and the NSF collaborate on this project to make comprehensive national surveys of postdoctoral scholars a reality.**