

What we call postdoctoral researchers matters, scientists say

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In a forthcoming opinion piece in the journal *eLife*, eight scientists and science policy experts make the case for standardizing how postdoctoral researchers are categorized by human resources offices and provide a framework that willing institutions can follow.

The authors argue that the widespread use of inconsistent titles for researchers who've earned Ph.D.s and hold temporary research positions, primarily at academic institutions, makes tracking their progress difficult and counting them simply impossible. What's more, the authors say, different designations come with different salaries, benefits and professional-development opportunities, leading to disparities in treatment of similarly ranked employees both within and across institutions.

"Postdocs are a key component of our biomedical research workforce," says Wesley I. Sundquist, co-chair of the biochemistry department at the University of Utah and emeritus chair of the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology's Public Affairs Advisory Committee. "We owe it to them, and also to the overall health of our enterprise, to ensure that they are treated equitably and professionally, receive great scientific training and have strong career development opportunities. Standardizing [postdoc](#) titles and positions is one important step along that path."

In recent years, the number of scientists holding Ph.D.s and seeking permanent research positions has exceeded demand for them, forcing

many of those job seekers to prolong their existing postdoctoral positions or complete multiple short-term stints. Given that postdoc positions are designed to be temporary, some institutions have resorted to instituting term limits to ensure turnover.

"Unfortunately, this effort has led to the proliferation of new designations for similar positions," the authors write, and devising new names for basically the same jobs has consequences. "First, scientists in other designations may not receive the training and career development that is provided to their postdoc counterparts. Second, redesignating scientists who have exhausted their postdoc eligibility so that they can simply continue to perform the same work does not constitute advancement."

In addition, changes to the overtime rules in the Fair Labor Standards Act last year prompted many U.S. universities to raise postdoc salaries. "However," the authors write, "the use of nonstandard designations has meant that these improved pay scales and benefits packages have not always been extended to researchers who are essentially postdocs."

The authors point out that some young scientists even are willing to accept unpaid positions to avoid gaps in employment.

"While this situation is rare, this is a most extreme example of inequities in compensation between scientists at a similar career stage. A task force that studied nonfaculty research positions at Boston University this past spring specifically addressed this issue," explains Michael D. Schaller, chair of the biochemistry department at West Virginia University and the lead author on the *eLife* article.

The authors say policies at the University of Chicago and Boston University are worth examining. Both institutions have taken steps to standardize their postdoc titles and treatment. At Chicago, there now are

only two designations—fellow and scholar—and both get equitable pay and experiences. In Boston, administrators cut down 12 professional research titles to four, one of which describes postdocs (termed "postdoctoral scholars"), and eliminated unpaid research positions entirely.

"In our paper, we take the lessons learned by the University of Chicago and Boston University and provide a blueprint to perform the necessary task of postdoc consolidation at any institution," says André Porter, policy analyst at ASBMB and an author. "Our hope is that institutions use the step-by-step outline that we've developed and implement many of these recommendations in order to ensure that these young researchers not only receive parity in treatment but in career opportunities as well."

The proposal is overdue, says Gary McDowell, executive director of Future of Research and one of the article's authors. "As one colleague recently said to me, it makes no sense that we can use gene editing in human embryos, but we can't count our postdocs. We hope that we can give institutions a framework to find and more efficiently administer their postdoc populations."

More information: Michael D Schaller et al, What's in a name?, *eLife* (2017). [DOI: 10.7554/eLife.32437](https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.32437)

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