

The story of the Einstein Postdoctoral Association (EPA)

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The Einstein Postdoctoral Association (EPA) was founded in 1996 at Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York as one of the first Postdoctoral Associations in the US. Its founding was highly encouraged and supported by Dean Purpura and the founding postdoctoral scholars were Dr. Fiona Pixley and Dr. Paula Cohen. Fiona Pixley, now Associate Professor at the University of Western Australia, says about the founding process: 'We called a [postdoc] meeting by putting flyers up throughout the research buildings and expected a handful of attendees. To our surprise, there was standing room only [...] and almost everyone there expressed interest in setting up a postdoctoral association to address the numerous issues faced by postdocs in the mid 1990s. Importantly, not only was Dean Purpura very supportive of our subsequent request to set up the EPA but he ensured its success by appointing Dennis Shields as the first postdoc faculty representative and funding a postdoc office. We were able to really kick start publicity for the EPA with the Inaugural Einstein Postdoctoral Symposium that Dean Purpura also funded. The choice of Dennis Shields as the first Director of the Belfer Institute was inspired. He was a fantastic advocate for postdocs and was a delight to work with. In our first year [...] we surveyed the postdoc population (Nierras et al., Einstein Quarterly, 1997, 14:30-38). [Since] the EPA was one of the first postdoc associations founded in the US, Paula and I were invited to participate in the 1998 AAAS Annual Meeting special symposium on Postdocs to foster the development of postdoc associations in other institutions and, from this, the national postdoc body was eventually formed.'

Since then, the mission of the EPA has been to improve scientific interactions among postdocs and the quality of their personal life. Every postdoctoral researcher joining Einstein is automatically part of the association and its email list, and therefore, the EPA consists of 320-380 members throughout the year. Accordingly, everyone is regularly informed about ongoing events. Approximately 15 EPA representatives, meeting bimonthly, constitute a group of motivated postdocs from each department in order to guarantee broad representation. The current EPA is led by three co-chairs from three different continents, thus providing different views and opinions. We experienced that the diversity of the representatives is very helpful in connecting with the very international and diverse group of postdocs at Einstein.

The EPA is funded and supported by the Belfer Institute (Einstein **Postdoctoral Office**, PDO) which oversees postdoctoral affairs at Einstein. The co-chairs meet with the director of Belfer on a monthly basis to discuss new ideas and general problems. They also coordinate on the annual Postdoc Appreciation Day, regular postdoc orientation events, and the Dennis Shields awards ceremony to honor outstanding postdoctoral research accomplishments.

Achievements and services provided to date include a resource guide for new postdocs, written and regularly updated by postdoctoral representatives, monthly interdepartmental

seminars from and for postdocs, an independent website (www.einsteinpostdocs.info), free tax software for international postdocs, an annual BBQ and 'Welcome Mugs' with our own EPA logo. EPA representatives are also part of the Career and Professional Development Program committee, which discusses the specific needs of postdoctoral scholars and ideas how to prepare them better for their next career move. Ongoing projects include cheaper and easier internet access in postdoc housing, also we plan to organize larger networking events for all New York postdocs such as picnics in Central Park, which would be particularly convenient for families. In addition we work together with the PDO to establish and/or refine postdoctoral policies such as retirement, healthcare and childcare plans.

The overwhelming majority of postdoctoral researchers joining Einstein originate from countries other than the US, thus limiting their initial resources. Therefore our **future and innovative project** is to provide these postdocs with a start-up '**Survival Kit**' in order to help them to settle in an - in most cases - unfurnished apartment.

The idea is for every department to buy one "Survival Kit" which will be lent to an incoming postdoc. The new postdoc will keep it until he/she has gotten his/her own items. The kit will include: an aerobed, kitchenware, toiletries and helpful information. As a first step, the EPA representatives will be informed regularly about incoming postdocs and will be in charge of welcoming the new postdocs with the 'Survival Kit' and a "Welcome Mug", containing candies as well as cards with our contact e-mail and our homepage address to promote familiarity with the EPA activities. We therefore hope to ease the transition to Einstein and provide a smooth and pleasant integration of new postdocs into our community.

Even as an experienced postdoctoral association, we face general problems such as the recruitment of new representatives and overcoming the generational change in the board post elections. Our successful strategies for volunteer recruitment include:

- Extensive advertisement: We advertise in the administrative offices as well as in elevators/departments and via an EPA-email list.
- Presence in various committees such as the CPD, Quality of Life Committee (QOL), Belfer Advisory Committee, the Senate Council and in the Faculty Senate.
- **Active networking** at numerous events and clubs such as Toastmasters Club, Consulting Club, International Coffee Hour and Social Hour.

Carola W.: 'As one of the co-chairs of the EPA, I am excited to address the upcoming challenges in a collaborative, productive, but most importantly passionate and supportive way. I am confident that we will continue to fulfill our mission by steadily working on improvements regarding the quality of life for the postdocs at Einstein.' As Albert Einstein himself says: '**Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.**'